



## The Triumvirate Part 1

### Beginnings

The trip through the wormhole had been relatively smooth, as wormhole rides go. The tugging at the edge of the mind; the feeling of madness that crept up behind your thoughts, but skittered away the moment you were aware of them. The odd “push-pull” feeling as the gravity well was gained and overtaken, then the exhilarating feeling of being free from some oppressive presence. It was hardly noticeable to those who had used wormholes for travel before, as travel through wormholes had become the standard form of travel wherever they were available. Humans had been taking them for granted for nearly 125 years now. Still, this didn’t calm the heart of the young man gripping the armrests of his seat so hard his knuckles were white. An elderly man sitting next to him glanced in amusement at his neighbor and reached over and patted him on the arm.

“The trip is over, sonny! Try not to rip those armrests loose, the constable may have something to say about that,” he remarked, grinning at the uncomfortable younger man. Gritting his teeth, part in anxiety and part in embarrassment, the man tried to relax, and failed miserably.

“I haven’t traveled before, and I am a little concerned is all,” he answered. He was desperately trying not to look through the round portal on the older man’s left. The view through the portal was spectacular, but he only allowed himself a glance. What he saw in that frozen moment was breathtaking. The openness of the universe was festooned with millions of brightly colored stars, every single one in varying hues and colors. Interstellar dust and matter, some lit brightly by radiation from the local system’s star, draped like a giant ribbon through the black backdrop of space. His grip on the armrests tightened, if that was possible, and the older man seated next to him chuckled under his breath.

“Well, they say it’s the safest form of travel, these wormholes. I mean, how many times have you heard of people getting hurt using them?” he questioned the nervous younger fellow.

A slight bump punctuated the older man’s question. It wasn’t a large bump, as some bumps go, but it was noticeable. The older man looked out the round portal, the smile on his face slowly transforming into a look of confusion. He turned to his companion and his jaw began to work, but no words came.

“W-w-what... what is wrong?” the man gripping his armrests asked with a trembling voice.

“I... I am not sure. But... no, that can’t be! I thought...” his words trailed off into a whisper, as he leaned back and closed his eyes, and he joined the younger man seated next to him by gripping his own armrests.



“What?! You thought what?” the younger man desperately asked his seatmate.

Just then another slight bump occurred, but this time it was followed by an odd rolling sensation that seemed to run the length of the ship, from back to front. As the strange rolling wave worked its way through the ship, it seemed to explore the very molecular fabric of everything it touched, and as the wave ran the length of the ship, the escape pods built into the liner, but never used before, began to jettison into space, taking with them the passengers and crew.

“What just happened?” demanded a large man in the uniform of the Terran Republic. His shoulder boards signified his rank of ship captain. There were other crewmembers around working frantically to maintain control of a liner they did not know was already doomed.

“Sir, it appears the wormhole collapsed. It is gone and the resulting gravity well shockwave anomaly is catching up and overtaking us,” answers a young woman with the sigil marking her as a Science Officer emblazoned on her left shoulder. “Sir, the Louise will not survive this.” It was a statement of fact, and it allowed no room for argument or speculation. The captain simply stood there and watched as the various alarms signaling the progressive jettison of escape pods worked their way up the emergency indicator board.

The young man didn’t even try to open his eyes as the pod left the ship carrying himself and his older companion out into the vast reaches of space. There was a moment of a soul-aching chill, a sense of weightlessness, and then the pod’s artificial environment took over. The pod sailed into space, pre-programmed to get clear of the dying ship, its signal and locator beacon already active and transmitting, joining 49 other transmitters that were chirping happily to anyone who was out there to hear.

The Terran Republic had pretty much explored the majority of the planet, even being as large as it is. There were still some areas to verify terrain, explore, and categorize, but for the most part, they had surveyed and mapped the surface. The vast expanses of the world afforded a wild variation of environments to develop. The indigenous plant life had taken advantage of this freedom by developing into a myriad of species and subspecies that came in every shape, color, and combination imaginable. The first Terran Republic agri-biologists to land had a field day cataloguing and naming the different life forms they found, and were yet barely scratching the surface. Most of the colonists were not quite as interested in the flora and fauna of the planet. They had been sent to adapt the planet to Earth-standard conditions and that normally wasn’t conducive to learning to like the native life. Colonizing most planets was a dirty, hard job. A majority of the planets the Terran Republic had discovered were radically different from the Earth’s environment and required massive amounts of work and equipment to adapt it to Earth-standard for full exploitation of its resources. It was a stroke of luck that this huge planet was



already nearly perfect for the rapid build-up of Colonists without the preparatory work normally needed prior to the establishment of settlements. Thus, the planet was rapidly settled and the resources had been tapped into, already being funneled back to Earth for use in the Terran Republic's thriving economy. Even though it was so similar, there were hidden dangers. Many plants were found to be venomous to the touch, and some animals were harder to deal with than the Colonists had experienced before. The healthy plant life had also lent itself to a robust animal life. Despite all these challenges and the fact that the Republic had yet to clear it, the world still had the feel of a fully standardized planet because it was so similar to Earth to begin with. The Colonists were eagerly seeking to find more ways to use the different minerals and material that were so richly abundant on the planet. The world was divided into ten huge continents. These each had their own huge deposits of natural resources. But this eagerness to use the apparently abundant and endless riches of this world was not equally shared by all. A small, yet concerned stratum of the population had grown to be more vocal recently on what they termed the "rape" of the planet. A recent discovery of alien technology on the planet had only fueled the arguments of this sentiment, and the people had formed a group to try and slow the massive shipping off world of the more precious materials. They had established a strong lobby in the Republic's governmental Earth Parliament that helped see the interests of the Republic accomplished. Borrowing the strange name deciphered on the alien technology, they had chartered the first "Vanu" representative body. The Terran Republic representatives, having experienced this type of factional behavior on other Colonized planets, took it all in stride. The Terran Republic's massive military might had never been challenged successfully thus far. Although the Vanu representative body was fairly small at the beginning, they had grown into a rather powerful lobby. The group had faced challenges of its own, though. A splinter group had formed and then broken away fairly recently stating a more liberal view to the strict Vanu ethos of the use of the alien technology. The New Conglomerate was a hybrid of the two representative bodies already functioning within the planet's small parliament. It drew a smattering of supporters from both of the groups, usually people disillusioned with the opposing viewpoints, either one too radical (the Vanu) or one too economically driven (the Terran Republic). The political maneuverings of the now firmly established parties, the Vanu and the New Conglomerate, were watched very closely by the Terran Republic. The two never openly defied the Republic, but their activities began to be a little more extreme with each passing month. The Republic's military arm had not been called as yet, though.

When the wormhole suddenly and mysteriously closed, that changed drastically. The two representative bodies, seizing on the confusion happening in the Terran Republic's governmental representatives at the loss of communication from Earth, declared themselves free of the Terran Republic and took steps to establish themselves as autonomous governments. The Vanu even renamed their representative body as the "Vanu Sovereignty, further expressing their desire to be totally free of the Terran Republic.



That's when the first casualties occurred. A Terran Republic rescue ship, returning from a mission to retrieve stranded immigrants from space after the wormhole closed, had experienced an in-flight emergency. They had unfortunately been forced to land within an area claimed by the more radical Vanu Sovereignty. Thinking the Republic was invading, the Sovereignty had attacked the rescue ship after it landed and killed nearly fifty people before they realized what was going on. The Vanu Sovereignty's representatives had raced to communicate the error, but the Republic saw it as an open declaration of war. Considering both the breakaway governments to be in alliance, the Terran Republic attacked settlements loyal to both nations, seeking to confiscate any weapons and or anti-Republic propaganda. They were not hesitant in spilling the blood of either faction, as the bottled up hostility over the breakaway actions seemed to find a channel with which to vent. These violent incursions caused a deep hatred to be born in the hearts of the three governments. The Vanu Sovereignty felt the New Conglomerate had abandoned the true way, and considered them as a puppet regime established by the Republic. The New Conglomerate, actually not too hostile to the Sovereignty, became embittered over the fact they felt that the attack on the Republic rescue ship was uncalled for and was why the Republic started the war on them to begin with. The web of mistrust and ill timed political subversions created a time bomb that had exploded. The planet found itself in the middle of a war that would never seem to end. Thus began the War of the Triumvirate.

The rescue ship had appeared huge when it pulled alongside the escape pod. The older man who had earlier seemed so calm on the ride through the wormhole was unconscious and quite appeared dead to the younger man sitting next to him. The man reached over and tapped the older passenger's hand. There was no response, and this only heightened his anxiety. The sight of the rescue ship had calmed him somewhat, but it had been awhile and nobody had attempted to contact him over the little communication screen on the bulkhead in front of him. It was still dark as it had been the whole trip. He leaned back and decided he had better just be patient. There was no telling how long or what needed to be done to get him out of the cramped escape pod. He had avoided looking out the portal until he had seen the approach of the rescue ship. It had reflected a flash of light from the star that dominated this system into the pod and woke him up earlier. Once he saw what it was, he had gone back to dutifully ignoring the window into space. Now, boredom got the better of him and he bravely, if somewhat hesitantly, unbuckled his seat harness and slowly stood up. The gravity in the pod was no different than the liner had been. The air was staler smelling, if that was possible, but it was air, and that was good enough for him. He didn't have a lot of room to walk around in the pod, so he just kind of stood and stretched his legs, and arched his back with his arms outstretched above his head. The ceiling was a little low so he was forced to bend his arms at the elbows. He stretched long and hard. It seemed to help relieve some of the anxiety and he stretched one more time.





"Please prepare for docking. Take your seat and be patient."

The announcement nearly caused him to have a heart attack. The broadcast had come from the communication speaker situated just under the communication monitor. The monitor didn't come on at all; it remained the same dull flat gray color it had been. Glancing at the unconscious man and seeing no reaction, he hurried to comply with the orders, and finally got himself refastened into the harness. He looked at the older man, but he still had not moved. He appeared slightly paler, almost a waxy color even

"Please state your name, immigration identification number, seat number, and escape pod number. The escape pod number may be found on the bulkhead above the communication monitor in red letters"

The voice startled him a little again, but not as bad as the first time. He reached under his seat and dragged his backpack out, undoing the fasteners to open it up and retrieve his immigration papers. He glanced at the older man. He was most certainly dead. His skin was growing paler by the moment. The younger man cleared his throat and read off the requested information, facing the communication monitor.

"Havel Striver, immigration number HS-332-09-4976, seat number A-13, escape pod number," he hesitated a moment while reading the number, "...number 13-G." He waited a few minutes, and then added, "Umm, there is another person here with me, but... I, uh, I think he is dead." There was no reply, so Havel relaxed as best he could, and tried to avoid looking at the apparent dead man next to him. He put his immigration papers back into his pack, and slid it under his seat where it had been. He considered for a moment reaching under the old man's seat and pulling his briefcase out to look for his papers or other information on him, but he decided against that. After about 5 minutes of total silence, a metallic rasping sound emanated from the other side of the bulkhead. The pod lurched a little, then a waft of air circulated from a vent somewhere in the ceiling of the pod, indicating a connection with the ship Havel had seen earlier out the portal window. There were some slight sounds transmitted through the hull of the pod, but nothing he could follow. The monitor suddenly flickered to life, a small white screen, then the image of a man with a uniform, Terran Republic, appeared. He was looking at the screen and appeared to be looking directly at Havel.

"A-13, do you have any injuries to report?" the man asked. He seemed totally disinterested in the information that Havel was about to relay to him.

"I...I, umm, no, I don't... but there is..." he was cut off by the man's flat voice again.



"Confirm that you have no injuries," he replied mechanically. "Please be patient while we process your immigration number and community assignment."

"But, there is a man here who..." he started to say, but the screen went blank. Havel sunk back into his seat, disheartened by his very first contact with a Colonist. It appeared his new home was a lot different than the recruiting ads promised. He settled into his seat, trying not to look at the old man, or out the portal, and he tried very hard not to begin to regret his decision to come out here in the first place.



## The Triumvirate Part 2

The pod seemed to jolt slightly again. It startled Havel awake, and he frantically tried to wipe the sleep from his blurry eyes. A crack appeared in the bulkhead, something that he had not been able to make out before. The crack was even and it quickly formed into a round portal that slid open with a metallic hiss. A man with a Terran Republic uniform stepped in quickly. He wore the sigils of the medical division of the Terran Republic's armed forces. He glanced quickly at Havel, and then moved with a purpose to the dead gentleman next to him. The medic ran a small device over the old man that appeared to check what Havel already knew to be true. The medic palmed the device, sighed and reached into the man's coat looking for his papers. Not finding them, he turned to Havel he began to run the device over him next.

"Did the man have papers that you know of?" he asked Havel calmly.

"I never saw them, but he has a briefcase under his seat," Havel replied quietly.

"You are fine, and appear to have no ill effects from the wormhole collapse," the medic explained in the same calm voice. He put away the device and looked Havel in the eye. "It's been a long day, and we have been busy. Please understand that we are not as rough as it first appears," the medic said with a tired look.

"I understand," Havel said in reply.

"Thanks, man," the medic smiled in return. He then squatted by the old man's chair and reached under it pulling out the briefcase stored neatly there. He checked for locks, which were engaged, then looked at Havel again. "It appears we will have to have someone else open it. It is locked," he said. He stood with the briefcase and spoke to Havel again in the calm voice, "Follow me. We have to get all of those who survived back to the planet's surface. We have a lot of survivors from the transport. More than we thought we would find." He turned and stepped back through the round door. Havel unfastened his seat belt, stood slowly, and followed the medic into the bigger ship. When he stepped through, he almost fell over backwards looking at the inside of it. It was huge. It appeared to be big enough to be the inside of the planet itself. Havel had never seen a ship so big. The medic was standing a short distance away on a marked walkway that ran off into the center of the big ship. "Big, huh?" He chuckled slightly over the look on Havel's face. "It is a big ship. One of the biggest we have here planet side. The Republic saw fit to lend us the use of it when we first started colonizing. Appears they won't get much return on it now," he commented.

"I have never seen anything like it. Where does the crew sit?" Havel asked haltingly.



“They are up at the bridge. We are in the receiving bay right now. It’s like a big parking lot for ships. Come on, we need to get you seated for return to the planet’s surface,” the medic answered.

“This is just one room in the ship?” Havel gaped, as he began to follow the medic.

“Yes, just one,” the medic said laughing.

The two of them followed the walkway to an area where other people were being seated. Havel recognized some of them from the departure concourse at earth. All of them had that look of slight confusion mixed with a little fear. Havel knew the feeling. He stepped up to a seat that was fastened to some type of pallet that in turn was locked down on the floor of the big bay. There were rows of these seats fastened to the pallet, which extended to cover most of the bay floor. In the middle was a set of steel looking rectangular boxes lined up in rows also. There were about ten to fifteen of those, as far as Havel could tell. He was surprised any cargo at all survived the destruction of the transport. He got fastened in and looked for the medic. He was nowhere to be seen. The milling crowds began to thin out as people found seats or were helped into seats by crewmembers in overalls. Once all the people had been seated and their belts checked, the crewmembers also disappeared as the medic had. There wasn’t much conversation, just a murmur that ran through the big bay. Havel thought he heard some snatches of conversation by a rather pretty woman seated a few rows back. She seemed to be complaining about the small seats, and the conditions in the bay. Havel was amazed by her ingratitude. His earlier stereotyping of the Colonists leapt to his mind as he listened to her criticize the crewmembers and their work. He decided that he would be more conscious of forming opinions so quickly next time. There was a sudden low throbbing sound, and then a slight lurch as the big ship seemed to ponderously begin its movement. Havel could not begin to imagine the huge engines or the tremendous amount of power it took to move this ship. He looked up at the roof, which was a good ways above him. He could make out windows and almost see where the different levels of the ship were. He felt fairly safe in this ship, and calmly waited for the descent. He wasn’t sure what to expect, but he felt sure it would be rough. He glanced around the bay as the throbbing began to get a little louder. It seemed louder already than the transport he came through the wormhole in. One good thing about the noise was he couldn’t hear the lady whining behind him. The pulsating sound leveled off, and Havel figured that they were probably coming to the planet’s atmosphere. He began to grip the armrests again, and then quickly stopped, remembering the last time he did that. He forced his hands back into his lap, nervously dry washing them there. The sound of the pulsating engines suddenly shifted to an interrupted thrumming sound, as if they were being turned off and on extremely rapidly. Havel began to look around when the huge bay shook violently then a high pitched whine that seemed to drive right through his head sounded, followed by a tremendous screeching sound as if a thousand giants were scratching their broken nails across huge chalkboards peeling the surface as they went.





Havel could not believe what was happening! Twice in one trip he appeared to be in a ship wreck! The people around him started screaming and yelling, some losing control and whipping off the seat belts holding them in their seats. The lurching ship simply tossed them in the air where they ricocheted off of bulkheads or were slammed into the floor, leaving bloody streaks where they met the unyielding metal. Their limp corpses shifted and rolled around like boneless bags. Havel was almost beside himself with fear. Alarms were sounding, metal seemed to be tearing somewhere close by, and a torturous sound began to emanate from the ship's engines that seemed to be the last death scream of this huge ship.

### Stepping Outside

All at once the sounds stopped, except for the people yelling and calling for help. The ship jerked to a stop, rolled slightly then righted itself. The dead bodies of the people who had ignorantly unsnapped their belts lolled about with the movement, imitating the life they no longer possessed. A giant door straight in front of Havel began to slide open as firefighting equipment began to spurt to life and choke off small flames and smoke that emanated from different spots in the bay. Sunlight from the star the planet surrounded streamed in, and for the first time Havel saw the surface of a new world. The light was oddly different, not anything he could put his finger on immediately. But it was slightly different in some way. He slowly unbuckled his belt, wondering what had happened and if there were any people nearby who would help him this time. The other people in the bay were also unbuckling their belts, but some were crying still and refused to let anyone near them, holding tightly to their belts. As the big bay opened, Havel unsteadily moved to the opening, in awe of this new world, his most recent experiences almost forgotten in his amazement. Some of the other people stirred behind him, also moving towards the door. Havel walked quickly to the opening, stirred by an eagerness he didn't understand. He came to the edge, looked down at the waving grass rolling like the sea from a gentle wind, and just jumped down. It was a little farther than he thought, though and when he landed it knocked the wind out of him. He immediately thought how stupid he was for doing that. He laid there for a moment trying to suck in air, watching the grass wave around him and the clouds in the sky float by. Suddenly the unmistakable sound of firing weapons broke through his thoughts. He suddenly was able to breathe quite well, and he sat up and spun to his feet in a crouch. He was still a few feet shorter than the grass, it had appeared shorter from the ship's bay floor. He had dropped nearly fifteen feet! It was a good thing he hadn't landed on a log or rock or other uneven ground or he could have broken a leg or worse. The gunfire crackled in front of him again, this time some of the rounds striking the edge of the bay, throwing chunks of metal into the air in white hot pieces. Some of it landed not far from Havel and smoke wafted from the grass. A terrible thought crossed his mind of sweeping flames chasing him down and roasting him alive in this tall grass. He did what any person would do with thoughts such as those; he ran as hard as he could away from the source of the smoke. The sounds of battle began getting more



intense as he ran, but it was soon fading behind him. He could just make out what sounded like return fire, and people yelling before he got far enough away for the grass to muffle the sounds completely. The grass was very thick, and he soon tired fighting through it. He couldn't hear the gunfire any longer and couldn't see the smoke so he slowed to a walk, then dropped to the ground, flattening the grass around him some to rest. His flight suit was drenched with sweat, as the temperature here was warm and very humid. Bugs began to swarm around him, some not so small, and some very ugly looking. Most just buzzed around, then left, but a few mosquito-like bugs landed and tried making a meal of any exposed flesh. He tried swatting them when he saw the land, but they were very fast. Quite simply, he was miserable. He almost felt like crying. But he wouldn't allow himself that show of weakness, as he saw it. His father had been very hard on things like that. He never knew his mother, as she had died when he was only three. His older brothers had gone off to be Colonists long ago, and he was the last to leave the home. He was not a true Colonist, but he had migrated as a civilian worker, sort of an indentured servant type deal with the Terran Republic. They treated civilians like him better, but he was still a way to make a profit with cheap overhead. At least that's how he felt about it. He leaned back and flattened some more grass, thinking thoughts of home and the decisions he made to come here. The sun was bright, so he closed his eyes for a moment to rest them.

The next thing he knew, he was being yelled at by Terran Republic soldiers, all of them pointing their weapons at his pounding head. He tried to sit up, but one of them yelled at him to lie down, punctuating his order with a rough shove of the barrel of his nasty looking weapon.

"Who are you with?" the one who shoved him demanded angrily.

"I... I don't understand..." Havel stammered.

"What, you don't speak Earth Common?" the man yelled at him. He threatened Havel again with his weapon.

"Soldier!" boomed a commanding voice from behind the angry man. The man snapped to attention, his face still angry looking.

"Sir, yes, sir!" he answered respectfully.

"You will not harm any prisoners. There has been enough death this day!" he ordered.

"Sir, yes, sir!" the man answered again. His face softened some as the other man approached. The sound of another person approaching was loud. It sounded as if he was huge. Suddenly Havel saw a man



in a big suit of armor approach. He appeared to be heavily armed and capable of lots of destruction. Havel simply gaped at this new sight.

“What’s your name, son?” the big suit asked him.

“M...m...my name is Havel, s...s...sir,” he stuttered. “Havel Striver, sir,” he finished more firmly.

“Were you on that ship back there, Havel?” he asked Havel, removing his armored glove and offering the prone young man his hand.

“I was, sir. I ran when I saw the smoke from the fires,” he answered, glancing around as he stood. The grass had been stamped flat all around him and there were close to a hundred Terran Republic soldiers milling around. Some appeared wounded, and there were medics helping them.

“Do you have any identification papers on you?” the big suit asked him.

“I, umm... no, they were on the ship, sir,” Havel said. He had begun to sweat again.

“Sir, he is one of them Vanu scum!” the soldier with the angry face gritted. He looked menacing again.

“I said can it, Hanson! I mean it!” the big suit barked without turning. He simply looked at Havel calmly from behind his suit visor. “Can you prove you were a Colonist inbound, son?” he asked gently.

“I am not a Colonist, sir, I am a citizen,” he answered somewhat hesitantly.

“Can you prove that, Havel?” he said.

“I can prove it,” another voice said from behind the big suit. A medic who had been working on one of the wounded soldiers walked up and saluted the big suit, “Medic Killian reporting, Leader Dane.

“You know him?” Dane asked the medic.

“Yes, I pulled him from a pod out of the Louise personally, sir,” he replied smiling. “Hello Havel. Rough day, huh?” Havel started to wave but thought better of it.

“Mr. Striver, you will have to forgive my soldiers. It was a nasty little fight back there, and they are angry. We lost some good men in the ambush and a large number of your fellow travelers. They are a little angry,” he finished with a grimace. “But we made those traitorous Vanu pay. We killed quite a number of them before the rest slithered away. We are waiting for a pick-up now,” he explained to Havel.



"I understand, sir," Havel replied. "Who are the Vanu? Why would they attack us? We were not doing anything," Havel said. "We had crashed landed!"

"We know that, Havel. What we don't understand now is why. The Terran Republic will find out," Leader Dane said. He glanced at the angry soldier who was now somewhat calmer. "Hanson, we will find out why your brother had to die today, I promise you, soldier." Hanson looked at the heavily armored Dane and his mouth was set. He said nothing. "Havel, are you prepared to travel?" Dane asked, turning back to him.

"Yes sir, I am," Havel answered.

"Then let's get ready for the dust-off. Hanson, go get the guys ready. Killian, can you take Mr. Striver here and just do a quick check of him? Again?" Dane asked smiling, winking at Havel.

"I most certainly will, sir!" he answered. "Havel, you know the drill!" he said with a grin. Havel followed the medic Killian over to a large area of flattened grass joining other people and some soldiers getting treated for wounds and injuries. It was a grim sight and one Havel didn't forget for a long time. The wind blew gently, rustling some grass that hadn't been flattened yet. It looked kind of like Earth's grass, but not quite. Earth was a long way away; a very long way away.



### The Triumvirate Part 3

The area around the transport ship was a hub of activity. The grass here was flattened in a lot of places and it was also scorched from fires that had already been controlled and put out by someone. The transport itself had taken some apparent damage from the “ambush”, as Leader Dane had described the battle. Havel was unclear who the Vanu were and why they had attacked the transport in the first place. From the newcomer packet he had received before traveling there wasn’t any mention that the new planet had any indigenous life forms. He hadn’t done a lot of research before he left Earth on the structure of the planet as far as government and all that, so he thought it could be something related to maybe a faction or different culture within the Colonists. His thoughts were interrupted by Medic Killian’s voice calling from the back of the huge ship.

“Havel! Come on! They are prepping for dust-off!” he called from the open bay. Havel was still amazed at the sheer size of the transport. He had never seen such a big ship before. He waved, and standing from his makeshift seat composed of discarded cargo material, he began to walk back to the ship. The maintenance people were making some last minute repairs on damaged areas of the ship around the bay door. Some other uniformed people were moving around inside the bay shifting things and tying things down again, preparing for flight. Havel got to the square elevator platform on the left side of the ramp and joined a group of technicians and other people who were boarding the ship again. The gate slid shut securing the people from accidentally falling out, and it slowly began to rise the fifteen or so feet to the bay floor. As it rose higher, Havel could see the area around the ship much better. Another ship, smaller than this one by far, was already taking off; it appeared to be another form of transport, but it looked more engineered for combat. That must have been where the Terran Republic soldiers had come from. It took off, blowing loose grass and stuff around. The grass settled in a few moments. Scorched areas of the grass were all around the back end of the ship. A terrific battle must have ensued after he ran away to avoid the fires. The grass was flattened all around the ship, and there was burned equipment and boxes and cargo all over. There were a few craters from large explosions dotting the area also, the ground churned up and the dark, rich looking soil exposed to the drying affects of the sun. He was horrified to see bodies still sprawled all around in various positions. Some were horribly burned, others were missing arms or legs, or in even worse condition. Havel could only stare at the carnage. These bodies were most definitely the dead Vanu who had attacked them earlier. None had on the Terran Republic uniform and the very fact that they were left in the open to rot was proof of the hostility the Terran Republic soldiers obviously felt towards them. There were a lot of Vanu bodies lying around. Havel was oddly saddened by the sight, even though they had almost killed him as well, and probably would have if he had stayed standing on the bay ramp instead of jumping down. The rest of the people on the elevator were silent at the view, apparently dealing with their own reactions to the





sight. The elevator came level with the bay floor and the little gate slid open allowing the group to discharge into the bay. Havel waited till everyone else got off, then he too proceeded into the bay area. The bay area was also scorched in spots, and there were still areas that had dried blood apparently left from the battle. He was a little sickened by it all. The steel rectangular boxes Havel had seen earlier before he had left the ship were still here. Some were being moved to other areas to make room for other steel boxes being hoisted from the outside of the ship. With a start Havel realized what they were; they were coffins! He wondered if the horror of his trip would ever be forgotten as he watched the crane operator hoist one steel box after another into the bay. At twenty he stopped counting.

The huge ship slowly began to lift off as the engines cranked up the power required to heft such a large vehicle into the air. The grass and trees vibrated with the tremendous thrumming of the engines, and any grass that was still standing was now flattened as the thrust from the gravity well created by the drives pressed downward. Closer trees were bent slowly away from the ship and a few even snapped and broke, falling over. The sound of them crashing to the ground was drowned out by the roar of the straining engines. The ship then began to pick up speed as it gained altitude, and was shortly nothing more than a speck growing smaller by the second, soon lost in the clouds. Two men who had been watching the progress of the huge transport and her crew and the soldiers as they boarded their smaller transport called a "Galaxy" turned to each other and nodded. They stored their binoculars and slung their weapons. Retrieving the communication gear they had been using a moment before, they stored it in the back of an interesting looking vehicle parked a short distance away. Locking everything down, they proceeded to climb into the vehicle and stow their weapons. The dune buggy-like vehicle, commonly called a "Harasser" backed up as the driver maneuvered to turn the vehicle around and follow his flattened-grass trail back to where he had come from. He glanced at his passenger, a grim-faced fellow holding a nasty looking weapon referred to by the Vanu Sovereignty as the Lasher. The passenger hefted the weapon, then placed it in a holding rack that had three other weapons already locked in place. The owners of those weapons would not ever be using them again. The two Vanu Sovereignty soldiers stared straight ahead as the Harasser bounced along the trail. Their thoughts were hard and grim as they headed back to their base.

### The Trip

The rest of the trip to the receiving station at the Terran Republic's main city was uneventful. Havel was extremely happy to finally be on the ground in the right place and eating a good juicy hamburger. He didn't think about where the beef might have come from, he just enjoyed the flavor of a medium-well cooked burger. The restaurant was full of people as most of the passengers had filed directly into the lounge, some eating, some drinking coffee and some just sitting with relieved looks on their faces. Some of them were wearing bandages from wounds received either in the fight back in the grassy field, or



from the rough emergency landing the ship had made. Havel still had not figured out or overheard from anyone why the ship was attacked. He had heard some people mention the Vanu again. They had been referred to as the Vanu Sovereignty by some of the Colonists who had greeted the newcomers when they had landed and began to disembark. Most of the comments Havel had overheard were berating the Vanu for this seemingly unprovoked attack, but there were a few people who seemed to sympathize with them, or to comment on the activities of the Terran Republic versus the Vanu Sovereignty or another group Havel hadn't heard of before called the New Conglomerate. He suspected there were many more political undercurrents than met the eye. He took a long pull from the straw stuck in his soft drink cup. He was happy they had Dr. Pepper here at least. It was funny the things he valued or deemed important now that he had seen so much and experienced what he had these past few days. He really felt he had to decide what to do next, as it was apparent things were going to change drastically with the closing of the wormhole. Now that he thought about it, he began to wonder if the attack was related to the wormhole collapse in some way. He really felt that there was soon to be some serious repercussions that were sure to be felt all throughout the Colony here now that they were separated from Earth. A familiar voice interrupted his train of thought.

"Havel! Heya! I see you found something to eat!" called the Medic Killian, as he approached Havel waving. He still had spattered blood on his uniform and there were a few scorch marks on his right sleeve. He was also walking with a slight limp, Havel noticed. He hadn't seen him limping before, or when he had last seen him before they took off. "Mind if I join you?" he asked pointing to an unoccupied seat at Havel's table.

"Sure, please do," Havel replied smiling. He had begun to like the personable Medic, as he seemed the only person that would speak to him without giving him an order, or threatening his life or health. The Medic sat down and began to eat the lunch he had carried over with him, oblivious to the gore that stained his uniform.

"So..." he began, talking awkwardly around the food in his mouth, "...what do you think of Planet Side so far?"

Havel thought for a moment before answering, "It isn't quite what I had in mind," he said at first, and then he finished his thought. "But I believe it will get better as I get settled in." He took another sip from his straw, enjoying his soda pop.

"Well, you haven't really had the best introduction here have you?" Killian said. He grinned and continued, "I can show you around a little. Do you have to report in to the Colonist Administrator first of something?"



"I am supposed to go to the building that houses the Colonist Administrator people, but I see someone different since I am not really a full-fledged Colonist. It is part of the Immigration and Naturalization Service/Planetary Division here, I think," Havel answered, reaching for his backpack. He laid it on the table, opened it and pulled out the paperwork he had been issued upon his embarkation from Earth.

"They gave me a little city map to help find the right building."

"That won't be needed, because I know where it is," replied Killian. He was busy finishing off his sandwich and chasing it down with a large swallow of milk. "I love peanut butter and jelly sandwiches!" Havel laughed as he put his paperwork back in his pack. He felt much better since he had made a friend. He knew the INS/PD required him to check in within the first twenty-four hours, so he stood and picked up his backpack.

"We probably better head to the INS building, I guess. I wouldn't want to start off my life too terribly bad!" he said. "It's been an adventure up to this point!" Havel added laughing. As the two stood, he noticed again that Killian was favoring one of his legs. "What happened to your leg?"

"Oh, that! After I had gotten you situated back at the ship after the soldiers had found you, I was helping some more injured people. We were dragging some wounded soldiers in when a Vanu Sovereignty soldier jumped up and took a shot at us. He was faking that he was dead, I guess. His weapon sent an odd energy blast that hit a guy standing just to my right." Killian paused for a second, obviously disturbed by his narrative. "The guy just kind of dissolved into a plasma gel. He absorbed most of the impact. The splash damage hit me and few others and burned us."

"I am sorry to hear that," Havel said, regretting asking Killian about it.

"It's okay. I have seen worse in my service with the Terran Republic. It just never gets any easier, you know?" he said. Havel nodded slightly, trying to appear like he did know. The two continued out the doors of the restaurant and turned right towards the direction of the building Havel needed to visit. They were quickly swallowed up in the crowds of people all heading to one place or another.

"I will probably need that video a lot faster than it's going to take to retrieve it," commented the stern voice. "I have to see what the attack was about, or if we can identify any new weapons systems being put into use."

"Understood sir," the Terran Republic soldier replied to the speaker protruding from the wall next to the door. He was wearing the standard Terran Republic Air Wing flight suit with shoulder boards indicating he was a pilot. The sigils of the transport division were emblazoned on his left chest over a series of decorations indicating many operations with the Republic. He released the button, then punched it



again, adding a thought. “Sir, we could call in Marsman. He might be able to pull the digital info from the Box a little faster. It is pretty badly damaged, but Marsman has been known to work miracles.”

“Good idea, Peacemaker. By the way, how did the drop go, once we got notified of the attack?” the voice asked from the speaker.

“It went well, but they were definitely laying low for us. The guys had just gotten downloaded when all hell broke loose. I think they slaughtered the recon guys before they had a chance to charge their weapons. Leader Dane was able to rally the platoons and got some pressure on the attackers. It could have been bad, if Dane hadn’t been there,” he replied.

“Yes, good to hear we pulled it out. By the way, has Dane been to the administration building yet? I received another call from one of the technicians there. He still hadn’t registered by last night. I thought he said he was going to register yesterday?” the voice asked.

“I have no idea, sir,” Peacemaker answered. He shook his head grinning. “You know how he feels about that registering stuff, sir. We will probably have to hold his food from him again!” he added chuckling.

“Did we have to do that last time? I need to talk to him!” the voice replied. It was obvious the person was amused with Dane. “Just tell him to get his butt down there and register!”

“Aye, aye, sir!” Peacemaker replied laughing. He released the button and headed out the door, making his way to Marsman’s lab.





## The Triumvirate Part 4

### Of Insects and Snipers

The buzzing really irritated him; it never seemed to stop. The climate was nice, and the time he got to spend on the beach was great, but the OP duty sucked bad. The Out Post wasn't improved at all, and still had the original Fallow Tree leaves someone had laid there serving as the "carpet". The insects in this area were absolutely gigantic. The lone sniper snarls and swats at another hovering bug but the insect lazily dodges his hand, returning to hover in the exact spot it was in a second before. Tobias snarled again, but didn't swat at it this time. He tried to ignore the various bugs that hovered, swarmed, crawled or buzzed about the OP. He went back to scanning the horizon and the broad valley that lay below him. The modest road below was fairly inactive, but he had been instructed that a small Terran Republic patrol was scheduled to roll through sometime within the week. Nothing special, but the powers that be in the Vanu Sovereignty felt the need to exert some pressure on the open movements of the Republic. He rechecked his Bolt-Driver carefully again. The tremendous humidity on this part of the planet was cause for concern. He had found some rust peeking out of the barrel near the gas return tube earlier. Something as minute as that could be deadly on this weapon seeing as how it packed such a large punch. He found a small ant-like insect crawling on the stock and he impatiently flicked it away. He had learned a few days ago not to let those things get their venom in you. Similar to a fire-ant from earth, they had a lot more potent saliva. One had gotten into a glove he had laying on the ground and he had put it on unsuspecting. The sudden pain was excruciating and swelled instantly. It had taken most of the last two days to get the swelling to go down and he had to constantly clean it due to the chance of infection or jungle rot prevalent in this jungle. He had seen lots of people get a simple cut from some of the razor sharp tall grass and succumb to a raging infection that started at the cut and turned into a foul smelling pus-oozing canker. He did not want to end up like that! He turned the weapon over gently, closely examining the polished metal, looking for any signs of tarnish or dullness. He was eager to try the rifle out, as he had yet to use it on anything other than the local wildlife and not a few tree trunks marked with silhouettes. He had just finished his tenth inspection of his weapon when he thought he heard the slightest sound from the west. The sun was just setting, so it made it very hard to see much in detail against the glare. He lowered his visor, and hit the tinting button that activated the liquid-crystal tint in the visor, making it easier to see against the sun's bright rays. He squinted still, trying to strain and make out any sign of movement on the road. It almost passed his notice; a gradual haze that seemed to be nothing more than a breeze-generated dust cloud far in the distance. But the cloud was persisting, indicating that something other than the wind was stirring it up. His stomach tightened as he realized it must be the Terran Republic patrol. He had butterflies! Now that the time had seemed to come, he was oddly apprehensive. The thought that these were fellow human beings, also struggling to





survive on this planet after the collapse, struggled to the forefront of his conscience. It was odd, really. He had been a firm “believer” in the Terran Republic way of life until the recent changes in policy. He had moved to live with the Vanu Sovereignty as a test to learn and discover their philosophy and was not decided until the Terrans had killed his friends at the invasion sight. The Republic propaganda machine had churned out the typical swill saying that they had simply been landing in an emergency condition. It might have been believable if the Terran Republic troops had not shown up so conveniently and slaughtered hundreds of his fellow Vanu Sovereignty friends. No, he was sold to the fact that the Vanu technology was the only way to go. It was more technically sound than the Terran concept, plus it was a purer form of philosophy. The strange Vanu culture held such a high regard for their technology that it almost reached a theological level. Like a “theo-technosophy”, as some in the Vanu Sovereignty liked to call it. It was at first a little hard to swallow, but Tobias fell into the culture quite easily. He wasn’t a big person, but had stopped growing early. It didn’t mean he wasn’t strong. He had a runner’s stamina from lots of cross-country training and he loved to take long bike rides. It really helped when he had become a sniper prospect, his ability to regulate his breathing being tantamount to his success at the fine art of precision shooting. But again, shooting a target was a different thing than shooting humans. The patrol began to get closer, but they were still a good distance away. He figured they must be around four miles or so away still, so he rechecked his position in the OP and double-checked his supply of ammo. He still really loathed the reload speed of the Bolt-Driver. It was just too damn slow for his liking. He wiped the ever-present sweat from his face and reached up under his visor to wipe at the sweat around his eyes. The patrol was close enough that he could begin to see individual figures now and he wanted to be without error in his shooting. He marveled at how cold his thinking was becoming the closer they got. He sorted through the patrol, seeking his first target. Naturally settling on the last man in line, he sighted the figure and adjusted his scope with the temperature, wind, and his position on the planet with the internal GPS the rifle scope was equipped with. These things all came together in the small but powerful CPU within the scope which then calculated the best shot and set the crosshairs perfectly on either center mass, or a head shot, depending on the shooter’s desire. The rifle was pre-programmed with a bit of Tobias’ DNA so his personal biorhythm was also calculated into the shot matrix. He got his grip, and wrapped his left hand around the stock. His right hand tucked into the pistol grip and his middle finger, which he used as his trigger finger, settled lightly onto the trigger. He pulled the rifle tight with his left hand, the butt settling comfortably and with a familiar pressure into the pit of his shoulder. He began his breathing exercises, and closed his eyes. He opened them again slowly, finding the target. It was a figure riding a Basilisk, with a piece of cloth over his mouth and nose attempting to filter out the road dust stirred up by the patrol members ahead of him. He had a weapon in a carrier case mounted on the quad-runner. Tobias coldly lined up and dialed in for a head-shot. The crosshairs adjusted in his sight then twinkled a soft green when they lined up on the figure’s head, just above and ahead of the left ear near the temple. Tobias rode the scope on the figure’s head for about



five seconds as his breathing evened out. He didn't even hear the shot when it went off; didn't even realize he had pulled the trigger. But in the scope the person's head simply vanished in a spray of crimson fog. The helmet shot straight up, the chin strap flapping wildly. The person's body wobbled for a moment while the quad-runner swerved then slowed to a stop. The body flopped over the handlebars and sprawled on the ground. Suddenly Tobias realized it was a female! It was apparent by the shape of her chest. He felt ill, and his stomach heaved. He had planned on taking two or maybe three shots before he escaped, but his swirling stomach was running his plans now. He vomited violently into the OP floor on the wilted leaves, the detritus splashing onto his boots. He didn't even look to see if the patrol had stopped or even noticed the downed Terran Republic soldier. He staggered back out of the OP and made his way weakly to his camouflaged Mosquito. He robotically removed the leaves and branches hiding his craft and slid into the seat, the image of the woman's head vaporizing replaying over and over in his thoughts. He had never imagined that his first kill would be a female. He had thought it would feel satisfying. Oddly enough it was rather sickening. But he knew he had done what needed to be done. The Terran Republic must be taught a lesson. With that thought held tightly in his mind, he flew the craft into the evening sky, heading towards the Vanu Sovereignty main base.

#### Paying Respects to the Dead

The Terran republic patrol halted suddenly, noticing the rear-most soldier was not with them. They could see Treena's quad-runner idling back a ways, but she was not on it. One of the soldiers further back began shouting frantically. They saw him dive to the ground wildly waving. The soldiers running to the spot he was at realized he was signaling that there was a sniper! They all dived to the ground, each looking to the surrounding hills. They had some experience with snipers, but not on this planet yet. As the few who were close made it to the runner, they noticed the body of the woman named Treena, her neck ending in a destroyed stump where her head used to be. She had been a lovely brunette, and many men had ogled at her beauty only to be set straight when she gave them her trademark snarl. She was married and had three strapping young boys. The boys were now without their mother, but had yet to find that out. The leader of the patrol, realizing the sniper must have moved on, stood and brushed the dirt and loose grass off his clothes. He took his helmet off and wiped his head with a gloved hand, shaking his head.

"Get her body up. Let's keep moving. Someone radio ahead to Greade and tell him to inform Treena's husband she is dead," the leader ordered. He looked into the hills around the valley, knowing this was only the beginning. The patrol regrouped and started their trek back to the Terran Republic perimeter.

Treena's funeral was nothing fancy, as she was not exceptionally rich or well-to-do. She did have lots of friends within the Terran Republic army, and her sons had many friends also that always admired her for



her soldiering abilities. The real issue came down to the fact that she was the daughter of the local Terran Republic commander, Commander Ernest L. Dawkinson III. He was devastated by the loss of his only child and his “Princess”. Some say he was never quite stable after her death. This complicated the politics of the relations between the Republic's land and owners here and the neighboring Vanu Sovereignty community. The two had been fairly peaceful even after the Collapse of the Wormhole, or as some were beginning to refer to it, after the CW era. There hadn't been a lot of fighting, only a few scuffles in the local bars between drunken men, but nothing serious. This changed radically within a few days of the killing of Rifle-Sgt Treena Dawkinson. Commander Ernest L. Dawkinson III saw the Vanu Sovereignty communities as a danger to his community and citing the “...unprovoked and brutal slaying of my defenseless baby daughter...” (never mind the fact she was a veteran of many Terran Republic operations and the definitive warrior) he began a ruthless campaign of oppressing the local Sovereignty merchants and outright night operations killing many innocent Vanu Sovereignty people. These actions were slow in filtering back to the Republic army's main base so the travesty of justice leveled against the Sovereignty community became a rallying cry for Sovereignty peoples and sympathizers throughout the area. The skirmishes turned into border disputes that turned into local raids that enlarged to general border wars and open battle between the two communities. Tobias never heard what his shot had produced. He had been sent on a new assignment further north into the blowing cold wastes of the arctic regions of the planet. Little did he know how his skills as a sniper fit perfectly into the wider, far reaching and tentacle-like arm of world politics.



## The Triumvirate Part 5

### First Steps

The sky was a deep blue this morning; the temperature had gotten pretty low last night and the air was sharp and cold. The visibility was nearly unlimited at this altitude and the panoramic view of the ground below never ceased to amaze him. He gripped the yoke a little tighter, pushed it forward a tad then worked the rudder pedals just a little. The Mosquito responded beautifully, rolling right performing a silky smooth barrel roll. He loved to fly; his whole life had been focused on being the best pilot he could be. In school he had always dreamed of flying. He used to make paper airplanes and imagine himself flying them as he threw them out on the playground, chasing them and watching their every turn and dip. He would dream of being the pilot in the little paper craft, dodging and rolling, streaking across the sky. He never lost that dream and as he grew older he bent his studies in that skill and once he graduated from school he had applied to the most prestigious engineering school he could find. He had been turned down flat by them. "Your monetary facilities do not support tenure with our school. Thank you for considering us." Three more times he had applied at schools and received the same reply. He had nearly been crushed by the thought that he would not be able to fly with the best trained in the world. He had read of great exploits by the Terran Republic's flying squadrons and never accepted that he would not be one of their numbers.

Thus, when an announcement had been made that the Terran Republic was recruiting pilot applicants for an experimental program, he had been nearly the first in line. He still remembered that day at the application processing point. The thousands of eager young people, seeing the chance to get into the Terran Federation as a flyer, all of them lined up and excited. Unfortunately a rather imposing man in a Terran Republic pilot's uniform had stepped out from the application building and announced that only five hundred applicants would be accepted. The hush that fell over the crowd, followed by the surge to get the applications filled out and submitted had almost been overwhelming even for the Terran Republic soldiers on hand for security reasons. There had been a few injuries as some dared to push too hard against the soldiers. Hamma was saddened to see people ruin their chances to fly by stupidity. He had filled his out and was at the head of the line to submit when he noticed a young man further back struggling with a larger man. The larger man had evidently lost his application paperwork and was attempting to steal the younger man's papers to replace his own.

Hamma had always hated to see injustice and unfairness around him. It was a character trait that seemed a throwback in this modern day. His sense of chivalry was well developed and he had even researched his family line to see if it had reasserted itself from a past ancestor. He had found that his ancestry was indeed a line of great warriors, living lives that had changed others and had righted many





wrongs. He had been strengthened in his beliefs then that his life was going to be one of a warrior in glorious service.

So when he saw the young man fighting to keep his paperwork, Hamma didn't hesitate to give up his spot in line, which was quickly and irreversibly filled. Hamma wasn't an overly large person, but he had taken lots of self defense courses during school to help relieve stress and to keep him fit for being a pilot. It was well known that pilots needed superb reflexes and excellent health to fight off the tremendous physical and mental demands of piloting in combat. He made his way to the two struggling men.

"Hey, what is going on here?" Hamma asked the bigger fellow.

"What business is it of yours? Get lost, punk!" the man had replied angrily. He turned his back and finally wrested the paperwork from the other younger man.

"It's my business because you are taking this man's chances away from flying with me in the Terran Republic!" Hamma said firmly. He reached out and tried to grab the now wrinkled paperwork. The larger man simply attempted to punch him in the face, although Hamma was able to dodge slightly and only took a glancing blow to the cheek. It still rang his ears and caused his right eye to water. But he reacted almost from instinct. As the man's swing carried his weight forward with the follow through from the punch, Hamma merely obliged the inertia generated from the swing and pulled slightly at the man's sleeve. This caused the man to stumble forward making him off balance. Hamma again simply helped gravity win the tug of war with the big man's frame and clipped him on the base of his skull with the edge of his hand. The man dropped like an over-filled sack of potatoes, dropping the paperwork as he hit the pavement. Hamma caught the paperwork as it fluttered to the ground and handed it back to the wide-eyed younger man standing witness to the event. It had lasted all of three or four seconds. Hamma smiled at the younger man.

"Okay, now you can have the chance to fly with me in the Terran Republic!" Hamma said with a confident grin. "You better get it filled out and handed in!"

"But, how do you know you will be flying with them?" the young man asked Hamma.

"Because I am destined to fly; I have no other goal and no other desire. Don't you feel the same way?" Hamma replied.

"Yes, but the chances are slim, right? By the way, my name is Peacemaker. What is yours?" he asked Hamma.





"My name is Hamma..." he began but was interrupted by a large man in uniform who had just walked up to the two younger men.

"What in blue blazes is going on here?" he demanded loudly with a commanding voice. He was looking from the unconscious man on the ground to Hamma and Peacemaker and back to the man on the ground. A few more Terran Republic soldiers strode up and they looked to the other man as if awaiting his commands.

"Uh, sir, well see, this guy here he tried..." Hamma began to explain, but again the big man cut him off with a wave of his hand.

"I don't want to hear it. Ryan, Sanders, get these two to the waiting room ASAP, and get rid of this pile of flesh here. Make sure these two don't start any more trouble till I get there. MOVE!" he finished with a shout. He turned and left, making a huge hole in the crowd as he walked away. Everyone within shouting distance was staring at Hamma and Peacemaker, some shaking their heads sadly.

"Great! Now I will never get to fly!" Peacemaker blurted. He glanced at Hamma and shrugged his shoulders. Hamma simply stood there, his mouth hanging open. For the first time in his life the horrible thought that he may not fly began to creep into his mind.

### In the Running

The waiting office was very utilitarian and bleak. It had one desk and eight chairs, one of the chairs behind the drab grey desk, the other seven lined up in front of the desk. There was a single glow bulb in the ceiling and no windows on the walls. It had two doors, one they had come in and another that was closed on the opposite wall. Two of the chairs were occupied one by Hamma and one by Peacemaker. Neither spoke, nor barely breathed as the room was dead silent. They sat very still, having had a rather hurried escort straight here after the incident out in the application area.

The same door they came in banged open nearly scaring them both to death. Three more young people, two males and a female, marched in, escorted by different Terran Republic soldiers than had escorted them. They said nothing, but cast furtive glances at Hamma and Peacemaker as they chose seats. There were two seats left empty now, besides the one behind the desk. After a few more minutes, the door banged open again, startling the three newer people and two more people marched in and sat down in the last seats. The door slammed shut and the seven people were left to wait.

Suddenly the other door swung open and the large man from outside strode in, shut the door and looked at the seven people. His eyes met each pair of eyes in the room and he seemed to search for



something. He went to the desk and pulled the chair out; causing a scraping sound that seemed inordinately loud in the small room. He sat down and placed his elbows on the desk and folded his hands under his chin. He watched the small group a little longer and some of them began to get a little uncomfortable and shifted in their chairs.

"I need each of your names, and the reason you are here," he said calmly. He moved his hands to the desktop and grabbed a pen that had been laying there. He moved some papers around and prepared to write on the paper. "I need your names?" he asked again, raising his eyebrows.

"Hamma, sir, I am here to fly," Hamma stated simply, with no doubt in his voice. The others in the room snickered quietly at his answer, thinking the man was referring to the incidents that landed them all here.

"Well then! You others think that is funny?" he asked the group of young people, staring at each of them. They all fell quiet quickly and seemed uncomfortable again.

"Well, I don't necessarily think it's funny, as much as futile now," Peacemaker answered somewhat hesitantly. His face was fallen, as he truly felt they had no chance now to be selected.

"Well, I am here to tell you each one of you has been selected to try and pass the training," the man said rather abruptly. "We here usually watch the crowds for certain characteristics and you seven displayed some of them. Whether you will be successful is up to you. But we will give you your chance." He stood suddenly and walked out of the room, slamming the door behind him without another word.

### The Wings of the Republic

The Mosquito hit a patch of CAT, or clear air turbulence, causing it to porpoise somewhat. Hamma deftly maneuvered the stick, bringing the craft smooth again. He had been reminiscing for nearly an hour now it seemed as he made his way out to the furthest point of his patrol route. The route was one of the most boring stretches he had ever flown, but he always volunteered for this one because of the amount of time it took to fly it. He just absolutely loved flying. He had flown every single craft the Terran Republic had to offer but loved the "Skeeter", as it was nick-named, the best out of all of them. The memories of that first year in flight training were still good ones, although some of the training was very difficult. Peacemaker had specialized in the heavier craft, opting to fly the transports versus the scout and attack craft. It took a special pilot to manhandle one of those things, Hamma thought to himself. He still remembered the first time both of them soloed in their particular specialty.

"This is Mosquito 12 to tower, over," Hamma said on the com-link.



“Tower to Mosquito 12, go ahead,” the tower responded.

I have Training Zone 3 on scope, tracking four, repeat, four slow movers bearing 110, over,” Hamma reported calmly.

“Mosquito 12, exercise, exercise, weapons free and hot, engage at will four targets!” the tower commanded.

“Mosquito 12, copy that, exercise, exercise, engaging hostiles!” Hamma replied, his voice rising in anticipation.

“Mosquito 12, this is tower, be advised you have friendly transport craft in vicinity, bearing 220, range one hundred nautical miles and closing,” the tower reported to Hamma. “Enemy is closing, provide close support if possible!”

“Tower, this is Mosquito 12, I am locked on slow movers in Training Zone 3, should I disengage? Over?” Hamma asked, beginning to sweat a little at the multiple threats beginning to light up his radar.

“Mosquito 12, this is tower. Make the call, as we have directed air support on slow movers, but contact is uncertain at this time,” the tower replied.

“Mosquito 12, this is Heavy 4-O-3, do you copy?” the voice of the transport chimed in with the tower.

“This is Mosquito 12; copy Heavy 4-O-3, over!” Hamma nearly shouted into the microphone. He was really beginning to feel the pressure mount now, as he knew this was all part of the test.

“Mosquito 12, we are seeing bogies rising to angels 5, desire escort in case of hostile intent, can you respond? Over,” the voice said. It was Peacemaker! He was piloting the transport!

“Heavy 4-O-3, this is Mosquito 12, I am tracking four slow movers in Training Zone 3, possible enemy transports. I have lock and should engage, please advise your situation, over!” Hamma requested.

Mosquito 12, enemy bogies just jiggled to come head-on, receiving hostile sweeps! Request you respond immediately! Over!” Peacemaker called over the com-link.

“Heavy 4-O-3, come to angels 7, bearing 180, accelerate to 300 begin ECM!” shouted Hamma to his friend. At this point Hamma realized he could not cover both his friend in the transport and engage the four targets originally assigned. Knowing he was very close to the four slower craft flying nap of the earth, he punched the speed on his craft up to maximum, and set a course to fly right between the two pairs of slower aircraft. As he came screaming up behind them, they had no clue he was so close and



when his Mosquito went by, the jet wash sent all four plummeting to the planet's surface. The drones impacted with a massive explosion that seemed to send heat right into his craft. The resulting shockwave sent his Mosquito sailing as he had positioned it perfectly to catch the shockwave and ride it straight towards Peacemaker who was positioned to fly right over Hamma. Hamma then could easily engage the enemy target and intercept any hostile attempts, thus clearing his friend's transport and also taking out another drone.

Hamma flicked the controls again copying the maneuver he had made when he had accomplished that spectacular feat in the Terran Republic Academy. The Mosquito responded almost lovingly, snapping into a nice barrel roll again. Hamma simply loved to fly.

Both he and Peacemaker had received lots of attention that evening at post-briefing sessions. The other pilots they had come in with, the other five people that had been pulled from the crowd that fateful day long ago, it seemed, had come by and shook their hands, slapped them on the back and otherwise said their congratulations. Their last mission flight training event was to be in two days, and it was supposed to be a culmination of all they had learned over this last year. Every prospective pilot was eager to prove his stuff and earn his Terran Republic wings. That day was going to prove to be more monumental than any one of them knew. Hamma, Peacemaker, Knightwyvern, Enigma and the three other pilot trainees were all very nervous, but still confident they would do well. Two days and they would be Terran Republic pilots! The day couldn't get here fast enough.



## The Triumvirate Part 6

### A Day for Flying, Yes?

The tarmac was crowded this cool crisp morning with eager pilot trainees, all of them dealing with the coming final test in their own way. Some were pensive, staring into the sky as if seeking some wisdom from the clear blue expanse. Others looked at the ground as if afraid to look into the sky that would soon be their final proving arena; not daring to seem arrogant and challenging it with a planet-bound gaze. Some simply sat with their eyes closed, maybe just hoping to get through it all without looking too bad. The experimental pilot trainee program had yielded some amazing results. Some of the selected people had simply taken to flying like it was second nature. Hamma was one, but there were others who flat out flew any of the instructors easily. Enigma, Knightwyvern, and Peacemaker had an almost legendary skill that the instructors discussed between themselves after flight training exercises were accomplished. By far the experimental program was a raving success. The early morning frost was just beginning to dissipate from the different aircraft parked on the ramp. The instructors began to filter out of the “Roost”, as the trainees called the Instructors Office, approaching the gathered students. They were all straight faced, not showing any hint of what was to come and the challenges they knew would be faced by their students. As the instructors approached the trainees, the group as a whole shifted nervously, knowing the time was come.

“Trainees, fall in at a-TEN-shun!” bellowed the student liaison instructor. He was always responsible for the physical training and conditioning they received. He was by far the biggest and toughest man any of them had ever seen. They all fell into formation, shuffling quickly to get to their familiar spots in the group. “Taller tap!” he yelled at them again. The trainees began the age old process of sorting the ranks by size. They sorted and came to attention again. “Ri-eeeet FACE!” he barked again. “Taller tap!” The trainees sorted again and settled. “Left FACE!” he finished the process with a final command. The group was aligned perfectly by size and the formation looked crisp and inspection ready. “Pa-RADE REST!” the man called. The students snapped to the position as one. The man then did a crisp about face and saluted the head instructor. “All students present and accounted for, SIR!” he reported loudly.

“Thank you, Sergeant Lyles. Please prepare the students for the Super Bowl!” he directed Sergeant Lyles. The Super Bowl was the term used to refer to the final round of tests before graduation.

“Yes, SIR!” he answered. He immediately did another crisp about face and yelled his relayed orders, “Class TR five-one-oh, fall out and fall in at your assigned craft, PREPARE TO FLY!” The students snapped to attention, took one step back, and ran to their assigned aircraft, reforming there receiving information and flight preparation from the ground crew. The students were each one now getting





pumped up, their hearts racing, and adrenaline flooding their bodies. This was it. The final testing period, the last step before official pin-on!

“Good luck, sir!” the ground crewmen said to Hamma as he climbed into his Mosquito.

“Good flying, sir!” the ground crewmen said to Peacemaker as he climbed into his Galaxy.

“Good winds, sir!” the ground crewmen said to Knightwyvern as he climbed into his Mosquito.

Good air, sir!” the ground crewmen said to Enigma as he climbed into his Mosquito.

The well wishes were heard up and down the flight line, every one earnest and heartfelt. The pilots to the person shot a meaningful glance at the ground crew, looks the ground crew had seen training cycle after training cycle.

“Mosquito 12, this is Mosquito 11, over!” crackled the voice of Knightwyvern over the com. He was excited; Hamma could hear it in his voice.

“Mosquito 11, Mosquito 12, over!” Hamma answered, just as excited.

“Mosquito 12, we have inbound bogies, bearing 192, 200 nautical miles and closing, over!” Knightwyvern called.

“Mosquito 11, Mosquito 12, copy that. Come to course intercept aggressive. Mosquito 10, Mosquito 12!” Hamma said. He was glancing around, checking 11’s position on his wing, making visual contact with his wingman. There he sat, perfectly on his wing, positioned about 7 O’clock and about three meters away.

“Mosquito 12, Mosquito 10, go ahead!” Enigma replied. He was flying the ghost position, floating near the surface of the planet, veritably invisible to any radar. Hamma had come up with the idea during a student “brainstorming session” a few nights before the Super Bowl.

“Mosquito 10 verify pulse, over!” Hamma called out. His heart was beginning to race as his test nerves settled in.

“Mosquito 12, pulse flatline, over!” Enigma answered. This was the little coding system they had come up with to confirm Enigma’s position waiting for inbounds. He was flying nap of the earth and ready.

“Mosquito 10, copy and 12 out,” Hamma replied.



“Mosquito 12, Heavy 4-O-3, do you copy?” Peacemaker called from his Galaxy. The lumbering transport was climbing slowly to attack altitude preparing for the exercise drop. He had a load of actual Terran Republic soldier students this time, unlike an empty bay during the training period. The Terran Republic soldiers had their own training to conduct and this was the perfect way to integrate the two.

“Heavy 4-O-3, this is 12, we got you inbound as well as bogies bearing 192. Make for angels 5 and come to our bearing, on my mark. Three, two, one, MARK!” Hamma said as he punched a small button on his flight stick. The button activated a snap signal that shot to the transport ultrasonically to verify coordinates through scrambled code so that Peacemaker could arrange his bearings to match Hamma’s flight bearings.

#### George's Truck

The day would have gone smoothly under normal circumstances and the Super Bowl would have been another successful graduation of the flight trainees to flight status without a hitch. But sometimes the ordinary becomes extraordinary when small factors line up to create situations not encountered before. Such was this day; the day Class TR 510 had been scheduled to fly. It was a silly thing actually, if you look at it on its own merit. A sanitation truck, driving down a route taken every day for the last 15 years by the same George Stillwell (no relation to the famous historical military figure, although he claimed it), suddenly and irrevocably finds itself no longer under control of said George Stillwell because good old George loved his smoke and his heart did not resulting in a massive heart attack that killed poor George Stillwell instantly. The truck, remotely controlled to some extent by the Sanitation Department, continued on its route. The only problem is that George had just begun the compression-destruction cycle of the truck’s garbage collection bin. Again, this normally wouldn’t matter, but there were alarms going off in the cab that weren’t seen by George’s dead and glazed eyes allowing him to shut the process off because Mrs. Fenster had thrown aerosol cans in the trash again. These cans, normally not crushed and destroyed by the truck’s internal nuclear fission concentrator, flared just a little, causing a massive “belch” as one sanitation employee had coined these happenings. The belch was actually a low level electro-magnetic pulse that again normally wouldn’t affect anything. But the Super Bowl was going on right now, and the EMP just happened to reach Hamma and Knightwyvern, as well as blasting Enigma’s Mosquito with the pulse. Every non-shielded circuit fused in a nano-second. Enigma didn’t stand a chance. His Mosquito went down quickly, his ejection packets firing him clear of the fiery mess that followed. His Mosquito tore out half a block of civilian homes.

“12 this is 10, I...” was Hamma’s only warning that something was terribly wrong. Suddenly his Mosquito lurched and began to roll over out of control. Fortunately it rolled right, and not left as his Mosquito



would most certainly have rolled into the lurching Mosquito of Knightwyvern. As it was, the two rolled apart and Hamma and Knightwyvern wrestled desperately to get control of their wounded birds.

“12 this is 11, I am going down!” shouted Knightwyvern over the com.

“11 this is 12, perform emergency procedure 116. Manually pump it out!” Hamma called, his craft wildly yawing back and forth nearly ripping his hands from the stick. He was attempting to do the same function, desperately grasping at the manual pump lever for the back-up hydraulic system installed as a redundant feature in all training craft. He was making some headway finally, but his mind was racing ahead, wondering what he should do next and whether Knightwyvern and Enigma were okay. “Terran Republic Control, this is Mosquito 12 Training, I have an in-flight emergency! I repeat, I have an in-flight emergency! Requesting assistance at these coordinates!” Hamma punched the little button again, sending the coded coordinates to the Terran Republic emergency center.

“12 this is 11, I have gained partial control, but I am losing altitude fast! No sign of 10!” Knightwyvern yelled over the com. Hamma had gotten his craft stable and was craning his neck looking everywhere for his wingman. Just then he caught a flash of silver off to his left about 10 o’clock. It was his wingman and his craft was descending fast.

“11, are you able to pump the controls up?” Hamma asked frantically. He was now preparing to roll to the left to try and catch his wingman.

“12, no and I am losing what pressure I have gained. Hamma, it doesn’t look good.” Knightwyvern replied in a low voice.

“11! Do NOT give up! You have air and I am on my way!” Hamma radioed to his wingman. Just then he noticed the smoke billowing up from the result of Enigma’s craft. Hamma stared for a second then focused his gaze on his wingman. He had no idea whether Enigma was dead or not, nor what had caused this, but he was determined to save his wingman. “Peacemaker! We have a serious problem here! Enigma is down, no idea his condition, and Knightwyvern is going down. Can you get here fast?”

### The Drogue Maneuver

“Hamma, on my way! Hang in there!” Peacemaker replied quickly. He plunged the controls for the engine power to their limit, the levers slamming into their stops with a metallic clank. His ship surged on the influx of fuel, and Peacemaker and his crew were pressed back hard in their seats. He slapped the warning alarm switch and began preparing the Galaxy for a hard combat climb and maneuver. The foot



soldiers in the back were all fastened into their jump seats firmly, but were still bucked around as the ship strained to follow the directions from the bridge.

Hamma began a steep, barely controlled dive to his wingman and his ailing craft. The falling Mosquito was wobbling from side to side and Hamma was beginning to think he wouldn't be in time. His own Mosquito was not in much better condition, but since his wingman had seemed to be between himself and the source of whatever caused the shockwave that hit them, Knightwyvern's craft was probably worse. He tried to roll his craft over a little more coming dangerously close to rolling it over and causing it to go further than he really wanted. But, he was able to hold it, and as he began to near his wingman's crippled Mosquito, he formulated a quick and risky plan to right the craft and maybe save Knightwyvern's life.

Enigma landed roughly in somebody's backyard, his canopy draping across a child's swing set while he himself almost straddled a teeter-totter. His first instinct was for his friends, so he quickly scanned the skies. He couldn't see anything, and some trees prevented him from really seeing much of anything anyway. He decided to go and make sure there were no other injuries caused by his downed craft. He hoped that nobody was hurt in the crash. He stripped off his harness and ran in the direction of the smoke and fires raging nearby.

Peacemaker finally got to the area where the three Mosquitoes had started their plunges. He saw the destruction on the ground but decided he could be of little use there. Although, he went ahead and flipped on the drop signal and readied the ground troops for the drop so they could maybe help with survivors on the ground. Once he got the reply of ready, he shot the troops out with a punch of a button, hoping they could be some help down there.

By the time Peacemaker had arrived in the area, Hamma had finally gotten to his diving wingman's craft and was beginning to put his hastily contrived plan into play. He had deployed his drogue shoot while diving and it had immediately torn the canopy apart because of the speed he was traveling at. But the cable that normally held it was still trailing behind his craft. He had told Knightwyvern to deploy his in-flight refueling cup from the nose of his Mosquito. Hamma, soaring directly under and then in front of the falling craft was able to snag the refueling cup, and leveling off his craft he brought the tension on the now hooked cable between the two Mosquitoes tight, and slowly pulled his wingman's craft level, sort of, then began losing altitude carefully. Knightwyvern was frantically working the pump and controls to gain some pressure and thus help Hamma out a little.

As it was, the two craft made a rather shaky but survivable crash landing in the local city park, rather than a messy crash into a residential area creating a larger crater than Enigma's unfortunate craft did.



The park equipment was worse for the wear, but the damage was minimal. The lawn sustained some serious divots and the two Mosquitoes were pretty much write-offs, but nobody was seriously hurt in the incident there. The same was not to be said in the neighborhood where Enigma's craft went down. The inferno left thirteen families homeless and killed six people, three of them from the same family. It was a public relations nightmare for the Terran Republic and their new trainee program.

#### Political Fallout and Heroes

What Hamma had accomplished with that maneuver was nothing short of miraculous and was now even in the Academy textbooks and flight manuals as an emergency procedure for dire situations requiring no energy landing assists. But that was within the hallowed and mysterious confines of the labyrinthine halls of the Academy run by the Terran Republic. They always took care of their own, normally. Especially when it came to hot shot pilots like Hamma and the other trainees found in this program. But outside, the Terran Republic needed a scapegoat, and what better person to use than the guy who they could front, then promise to send away on "...remote, terrible, punishment assignments..." to "...pay for this most serious breaches of air regulations..."

Thus Hamma was sent to Auraxis through the wormhole to serve out his apparent sentence for his breach of regulations. He was accompanied by the "...rogue pilots..." who were associated with him in the incident. This also served to keep them from wagging their tongues to anyone willing to listen. Peacemaker, Knightwyvern and Enigma all accompanied Hamma to the remote new world to form a fast growing Terran Republic Air Wing presence on Auraxis.

The present day came screeching back to him when Hamma was nearly startled out of his wits by his Zone Alarm signaling the end of his patrol path route. His waypoint marker was flashing and the signal alarm was blaring in his ear as he reached to flick it off and begin his return flight back to base. As usual, the flight was a totally boring ordeal, beside the fact Hamma loved to fly. Little did he know, this day was going to change very quickly and very drastically for him and the Terran Republic Air Wing on Auraxis.





## The Triumvirate Part 7

### Technology Rejuvenated

Sub-Commander Timothy S. Voerlin was disgruntled. Most soldiers are disgruntled though, so this ordinarily wouldn't be a problem. But Sub-Commander Voerlin was very disgruntled. He had been Commander Voerlin at one time, but simply because he had voiced his opinion about Terran Republic policies concerning the handling of a peaceful rally, he was now Sub-Commander Voerlin. He had been having a stellar career as a Public Relations Officer for the Terran Republic's Human Relations division up until that point. His covering and subsequent comments on what he felt to be the truth of the situation (which were reported truthfully, actually), had caused a backlash within the division he worked for here on Auraxis and his following assignment to this northern tier of the planet; thus ended his career as he would have liked it to progress. His assignment to this continent had been a shock. It was fairly desolate and most of the populated part closely surrounded the Warp Gate there. The population was mainly technicians and support people as well as a smattering of people who had dealings not so encouraged by the Terran Republic. The harsh treatment of the rallies back on the first continent found by the landing TR explorers had caused a few of the more vocal colonists to head out to places they felt were more open to their ideas, namely the fringes of the TR empire. But Sub-Commander Voerlin fell into his duties with his same attention to detail and his usual fervor. He had established a regular routine and had gotten to the point where he had quite a few good friends in this area. Most of his friends seemed to be of the same persuasion as he did, with some harbored anger towards the Terran Republic's running of this planet's colonization. This group fed off the resentment, and one day, when Voerlin heard of a particularly bad handling of a protest back at the original continent by the TR forces, an idea began to form in his head. The idea at first began to scare him, and he tried not to think about it much. It was totally against everything he had believed and felt prior to his assignment to Auraxis. But things here had changed his views on the Terran Republic. He had started to enjoy toying with the idea in his head, playing out scenarios, forming alliances and generally being an armchair revolutionist. It was a thrilling diversion and a way to psychologically get back at the TR, without having to actually do anything about it. But one day he took a step that changed everything in Sub-Commander Timothy S. Voerlin's world; he contacted the leader of the political rallies on the starting continent and offered the use of some empty office space here on his newly assigned area. It seemed harmless enough to him, but what he had just done was to start the third and final part of what would become a global struggle for dominance not seen anywhere else in the Terran Republic's expansive empire.

The actual reason for the crew out here, the huge machinery that was a Warp Gate, had even yet to be activated. The technicians had been having a hard time adjusting and retrofitting the equipment needed to reactivate the huge Warp Gates and the massive equipment needed to control and coordinate them.



With this technology found on all of the thirteen massive continents on Auraxis, the Terran Republic had established crews at each one, and also made three main cities that had begun to see a polarization of the philosophies most similar to each of the underlying streams of thought. The three main cities had huge support crews manning them, and they seemed to be the focus for the most organized efforts. The three main cities had luxuries that many of the other outposts did not, and because of that; the earlier crews manning them began to call them “Sanctuaries”. There were only three of these massive cities and it just so happened that Sub-Commander Voerlin was stationed at one of them. Voerlin was not necessarily interested in fomenting open rebellion, but it would appear some of his new acquaintances were. As a matter of fact, they had chosen a name for their movement only recently. They fancied themselves business men to a point, and decided that this new group would be called the “New Conglomerate”. They were free men, and free men had the freedom to choose. Or so they believed.

The Auraxis Global Network, or better known as the AGN, had begun to be recognized as the premier news-reporting agency on the planet. Right after the massive event that almost destroyed all of the satellites serving as repeaters for the news agency, the AGN had faced a near total shutdown of their services. Thanks to the attention of the Terran Republic’s science department they were able to get some signals out, albeit limited ones. Repeated attempts to restart the broadcast programming had failed though, and the AGN was forced to rebroadcast older reports and to provide limited coverage. Eventually the public, as well as the AGN administration itself, became frustrated with the limited service the Terran Republic was providing the AGN. The Terran Republic seemed to actually be discouraging any open reporting of the incident that had originally caused the destruction of the satellite system. Evasive answers, public officials who provided vague and misleading interviews only served to further muddy the trickle of information that managed to seep into the AGN broadcasts. The Terran Republic’s close censorship and control of the AGN began to cause public mood to shift and only served to feed the growing anti-TR movements on the planet. Eventually further technological discoveries, mostly from the mysterious Vanu hardware discovered on the planet, served to enhance the broadcasting abilities of the AGN to the point they no longer had to rely on the Terran Republic’s system and the AGN found itself able to broadcast totally independently and without censorship. This brought about some rather interesting developments. Namely the truth of what actually happened that day the normal communications stopped. That was the same day that the emergency landing of the inbound transport ship had resulted in the mistaken firefight between the Terran Republic forces and the burgeoning grassroots movement of the future Vanu Sovereignty. This information began the mistrust of the TR that would eventually fuel the movement of many people to the two breakaway governments of the New Conglomerate and the Vanu Sovereignty.

When Politics Divide



Havel had made his home in one of the tenant suburbs prepared by the Terran Republic's government services department. It was squalid at best and many people living in these areas had begun to resent the inaction of the TR in finding a way to get them back to Earth or to establish some sense of permanence here on Auraxis. The two breakaway factions had found recruiting for their individual movements extremely successful in these suburbs. Havel had yet to decide if the TR had really given up on them. He was still convinced that the TR had their best interest at heart. When the AGN had announced its findings on the closure of the wormhole, Havel was not very surprised as he himself had been a witness to it. But it did discourage his trust in the TR government. Shortly after the AGN broadcast on this breaking news, the suburbs were assailed by recruiting agents from both the movements that were to solidify into the New Conglomerate and the Vanu Sovereignty. Havel resisted the urge to support either as his allegiance to the TR was deeply imbedded. Many of the people that lived around him had signed onto the New Conglomerate's rosters and pressured him to do the same. There weren't a lot of people interested in the Vanu Sovereignty, as they seemed a little more out of the mainstream of thought. Plus the mysterious Vanu technology they were dallying with seemed to make people uncomfortable. Havel remained loyal to the TR in spite of all this. As a matter of fact he had actually considered joining the TR military after hearing a recruiting commercial on the AGN. He hadn't quite signed up yet, but he was pretty sure he would if nothing else opened up for him as far as a job. Once he had revealed that to his neighbors, they all began to shun him and most refused to talk to him at all. He had begun to fear that some of them might get angry enough to do something drastic, but he trusted that common sense would prevail. Plus, a lot of the New Conglomerate supporters had suddenly left and the rumor was that they had found a new headquarters on a northern continent somewhere. Some had mentioned a sanctuary there. Havel wasn't quite sure what that all meant, but he was happy that those people had left, since the New Conglomerate supporters were the most militant in their stand towards the Terran Republic. He was listening to the AGN when a news report interrupted the regular programming. What the reporter began to excitedly tell the listening audience stunned Havel. It seemed a Terran Republic air patrol had been attacked by hostile but as yet unidentified forces. Havel sat down heavily to take in what he knew in his heart to be another heavy straw loaded on the already over-burdened back of peace on Auraxis.

#### From SAMs to Samuel Adams

Hamma had just finished his lazy 180-degree turn to start the trip back to his landing strip. He wasn't overly concerned with the neatness of the turn as he was not under any restrictions from command to be careful where he flew. Just as his Mosquito had leveled off, his surface-to-air missile, or SAM, indicator blipped for a split second, and then went silent. Hamma's attention to the little indicator light was momentary, as it didn't come on again. He still felt on edge though as it seemed to him it had been



a good signal. Just then he saw it flicker a little again. Knowing that hesitation can kill in combat, he took the one known action that fighter pilots had done since the dawn of combat flight; he broke right and popped chaff and flares. It wasn't a moment too soon as an undetected, somehow cloaked, SAM rocketed through the airspace he had just occupied and ripped apart into a nasty explosion sending small slivers of steel and fire in every direction. The explosion was close enough that the slivers shredded the tail of his Mosquito and rendered flight controls for the craft nearly unusable. Hamma fought valiantly to save the vehicle, but it was not possible. He glanced back and saw the destroyed control surfaces of the tail of the Mosquito and faced the dreaded situation for any pilot; ejecting from a destroyed aircraft over what now appeared to be hostile territory. He reached below his seat, and retrieved the handle that was painted a bright yellow with black stripes. Tugging quickly and firmly towards his chest, he activated the ejection sequence. His Mosquito shuddered as though in its death throes as his escape seat rocketed out into the air. The ejection of the pilot also set off an automatic alarm sequence that notified command of the mayday situation. As Hamma was being jetted into the blast of air, command was already taking steps to formulate a rescue and reaction team to his location pinpointed by the alarm. The information also carried with it a snapshot of why the Mosquito was abandoned, relaying the shoot-down by a SAM. The AGN satellite network, having access to most military channels by virtue of having been run by the Terran Republic for so long, also received this information and was even now preparing a report to broadcast to the listening audience of Auraxis. The situation on Auraxis had just grown even tenser, as the arbitrary lining up of different unrelated happenings formed a scenario that only lead to one outcome.

A team of relatively new people operated the SAM site. They had never actually fired upon a vehicle airborne before. Everything had been simulated up until this morning. So when the SAM streaked skyward, set for cloaked run, the New Conglomerate soldiers never really expected to see what they saw. All three of them just stood there gaping at the scenario played out before them on the screen. They watched as the small projectile streaked towards the painted target, a Mosquito by its radar signature, growing closer by the second. They couldn't believe their eyes when the two objects almost met. The Mosquito seemed to try and peel away, but it was not fast enough and the missile disappearing on the screen gave testimony to the explosion and subsequent wild path of the crippled craft. KoldFusion stared at his crewmates and suddenly realized they had just shot down a Terran Republic Mosquito. He slapped the gaping Whoracle on the shoulder, snapping the soldier out of his amazed stare. Both of them began to realize exactly what had happened and the weight of their decision to fire the SAM. They had been given vague instructions from NC command, but they were still worried to how this was going to be perceived. Their instructions were to engage any enemy hostiles in





their area. But was this craft a hostile? It had not done anything overtly hostile, but it was in their claimed air space, even though this airspace until yesterday had been Terran Republic, officially. The New Conglomerate had secured the continent and claimed it as her sanctuary. (This was, oddly enough, exactly what was occurring on another continent claimed by the Vanu Sovereignty. Not the actual shooting down of Terran Republic aircraft, but the claiming of a continent as a sanctuary.) The three crewmen celebrated their small victory rather in an apprehensive manner, as they were not quite sure what would happen next. But since they were new, they failed to follow through on the standard operating procedure for an aircraft shoot down: they did not track the ejected pilot to recover him as a prisoner. This allowed Hamma to float to the planet surface, land albeit roughly due to the trees he fell into, and extricate himself from the harness before the three SAM crewmen even thought about what to do next. By the time they had decided to check to list for shoot down procedures, Hamma was well on his way to a safe zone that he could be extracted from. He was also sending the coordinates of the SAM site to his command section from his PDA. The Mosquito had transferred all of the important info to Hamma's survival pack PDA the split second he was forced to eject. The Terran Republic was well versed at war. They had been participating in it for years and had brought the discipline of it to a new level. Thus, their reaction to the shoot down was swift and exact. Fortunately for two of the crewmen, Whoracle and KoldFusion, the time in which it took for the TR anti-missile battery to fire and the projectile to hit was just enough time for the two of them to head to their vehicles to retrieve congratulatory drinks from their personal stashes. Unfortunately for the other crewman, he did not in fact drink and had stayed at the site to record the location of the ejected pilot. He got as far as typing in the first set of coordinates before he was vaporized in the counter missile projectile impact. The impact only flattened the two celebrating soldiers at their vehicles, but did not injure them. This episode had great political and sociological affects that tied in well with the happenings on the Vanu Sovereignty Sanctuary continent.

The Vanu Sovereignty command section had just come live as far as an actual functioning entity. The technology they had discovered and worked so hard to utilize was supplying them with some interesting products. The weapons they were striving to buy on the black market from greedy Terran Republic suppliers were just not enough to supply the growing ranks of people fleeing to the VS ideology. The energy-based weapons were a real challenge to get used to, but they were so different to anything the TR had faced before the VS knew they had an advantage. With the stand-up of the command section the Vanu Sovereignty had established official status as a rebel within the Terran Republic.

Knowing this to be the case, Tobias ran into the VS command section just having returned from another sniper mission. He had been used to assassinate many local leaders who were assumed to be under the influence of the Terran Republic. This had created the sought after terror within these communities and





had caused many people to waver in their service to the TR. But he was now worried that his status as a sniper would make him a larger bounty for TR hunters. He had done a lot of killing since that first kill long ago. He no longer got a queasy stomach, but it still was not something he lingered on. As he ran into the VS command section, some rather stern looking faces met him. They all turned and glanced at him as he rushed in.

“So we are public now?” Tobias asked, looking from commander to commander.

“Yes, as of ten minutes ago, we are,” one of them answered, not looking at him.

“How did we notify TR representatives of this?” Tobias queried. He was worried what the answer would be, based on the looks on the commanders’ faces.

“We opened fire on a TR settlement and wiped it out. It had been established on this continent, which is rightly ours. This is OUR sanctuary!” the commander replied a little over-zealously. “They invaded, we simply repelled them.”

“Have you thought that the TR may not see it that way, sir?” Tobias asked calmly. His head was swimming because he was beginning to understand where that put him in relation to the TR now. Even though he had been that way for a long time, now it was official. Now it seemed war was inevitable.

“We don’t care how the illegitimate government sees us or our actions. We are the rightful government now. The technology that we have found places us above the Terran Republic. They refuse to evolve they will die off. It is simple as that,” the commander answered with a stern voice. “We have your next mission here, Tobias. Please take it and study it. It is very important that you do not fail in this particular mission.”

Tobias took the manila envelope from the commander, slipped it open and read it to himself. His blood ran cold as he went through the instructions. “Do you realize what you are asking me to do?” he asked in a whisper. “This will begin a holocaust the likes of which we have never seen!”

“Of course, but it serves our purposes. You leave tomorrow,” the commander said and dismissed Tobias with a wave.

Havel could not believe his ears! The whole planet must have gone insane. Now he was hearing that Terran Republic settlements had come under fire and were feared lost by an attack from the group who labeled themselves the Vanu Sovereignty. This was sure to set off a planetary struggle for power of



unbelievable proportions. Just then a knock sounded at his door. Havel jumped up, calmed himself and walked to answer it.

"Who is it?" he asked without opening the door.

"Its me, Havel, SandTrout!" a voice answered. It was his neighbor.

Havel opened the door slightly and looked past his neighbor into the street. There were some people walking up and down the sidewalks, some with very concerned looks on their faces talking excitedly to each other. "Come in, please," Havel said. He allowed the door to open enough to allow SandTrout to enter.

"What is wrong with you, Havel?" his neighbor asked. He seemed to be rather calm.

"Haven't you been listening to AGN? The world had gone mad!" he replied frantically. He walked over to his little radio and turned it up. The reports of hostilities flowed through the airwaves. "What is going on?"

"It is inevitable, my friend. The Terran Republic has brought this upon themselves. They are tyrannical at best, and their draconian measures are totally unacceptable to any human with common sense. It is time the people rose up and set them straight!" he explained. He reached into his jacket and pulled out a stamped identification card. The stamp clearly read "New Conglomerate" across it. Havel was aghast.

"I can't believe it! Do you realize what you are doing? This is open rebellion! You read the regulations about this!" Havel gasped to his neighbor. He could not understand this. Sure, things had been bad lately but that was to be expected under the circumstances. But never had he thought to rebel like his friend here. "I must ask you to leave, SandTrout. I cannot have you here."

"Alas, so you do not agree. I see that in your face. Havel, I wish you would reconsider," SandTrout replied.

"I cannot and will not support open rebellion. I cannot believe you would ask it of me!" he answered firmly.

"Then I am afraid I must begin with you," the man says, again reaching into his jacket. This time he pulls out not an identification card but a weapon. "I hate to do this, but I am instructed to kill all who oppose the New Conglomerate, Havel. This Amp is my entrance to the real and rightful government of Auraxis. Through the use of it, I shall prove my worth and loyalty. Nothing personal, Havel, just plain business,"



SandTrout explains evenly to his shocked neighbor. He begins to squeeze the trigger when the door to Havel's home flies open and Medic Killian rushes in and slams into SandTrout violently, knocking the weapon from his hand and bringing them both to a tangled heap at Havel's feet. Havel is stunned at this, but has enough sense of mind to kick the weapon away. It isn't really necessary as SandTrout is unconscious anyway. Killian pulls himself up and looks at his friend.

"Havel, we have to leave. The whole suburb is in an uproar. It appears we are definitely at war now. It appears to be a three-way war. It's horrible!" explains Killian. "I am glad I came when I did! I knew you were loyal and would come under attack. Let's go!" he instructs the amazed Havel. Havel follows numbly, never looking back at his home and all his things. He never sees them again.

Hamma worked his way through the underbrush as quietly as he could. He knew for a fact he was in hostile territory, and could expect to be attacked or captured at any moment. So he kept all his senses alert, trying to remain invisible, silent and moving steadily all at the same time: it was exhausting work. His only goal was to make it to a clear dust-off place, someplace pre-arranged by a set of coordinates factored on his bail-out location and his landing location. It was an elaborate code designed to throw would be captors off the trail of the intended captive. All the TR pilots received training in it and so far in the history of the Republic, it had been very effective. The first hour was the critical moment though, and Hamma was still within that hour. His water supply was a little low as he had gotten it pinched between his Amp and a buckle on his harness making a pinhole in the skin of the water bottle. He had caught it, but not until some had dribbled away. He wasn't overly concerned as there seemed to be water in this area and he had fresh-tabs in his survival kit. But he needed to be picked up soon. He knew that command had a perfect fix on his current location and would definitely be waiting to pick him up, but just being on his own on the ground made him uneasy. It was a lot easier being in the air!

The air here was exceptionally dry. It was a lot different than the continent of Cyssor where his mission had begun. Hamma found himself sucking down a lot of his water faster than he wanted to, faster than he should. He had made it through the critical first hour and it had stretched to 3 and a-half hours and still no sign of a pickup. He was beginning to worry. He had narrowly avoided a search party of about ten people. Fortunately for him he had been laying in a clump of bushes and they passed right by him. He needed a dust-off bad. He was still trying to get comfortable in his little hide away when he thought he heard the sound of a Galaxy. He sat up and listened carefully. Yes! It was a Galaxy for sure! He began the pre-pick up procedures, first by selecting the wavelength that signified he was in earshot of the friendly transport. They would get the signal and begin location finding on him. He also heard what sounded to him like a Reaver! They had evidently taken this seriously! He moved out of his hiding area and went to



a nearby clearing. It was plenty big enough for the Galaxy to hover and to snatch him to safety. He waited right at the edge, not wanting to venture out into the open just as yet. Suddenly his radio crackled to life.

“Chick One, Mother Hen!” the voice called. It was Peacemaker!

“Mother Hen, this is Chick One, copy you loud and clear! Am ready for nest!” Hamma replied eagerly. He hadn’t realized just how nervous he was until now.

“Chick One, hang tight. We are ETA three minutes to outback. Spread wings, Mother Hen is near!” Peacemaker replied just as eagerly.

Hamma heard the sound of the Galaxy grow and then he saw it come in from the southwest. That was odd. It should have been coming from the southeast from Cyssor. It was a fleeting thought because Hamma was just glad to see it! A Reaver was close by, providing close air support.

“Chick One, this is Mother Hen. The Big Bird is ready for its baby to come home. Hawk One is watching for foxes, we are doing the mothering. Finalize P U procedures,” the voice said. Hamma unhooked his harness straps and secured the elastic snap release so that he could be snatched up by the pickup vehicle.

“Chick is ready to fly!” Hamma radioed back enthusiastically. He then ran to the middle of the clearing just as the Reaver and then the Galaxy popped into view over the trees. The Galaxy had its ramp door sluiced open and the gunner’s ports were actively scanning the area. Hamma noticed that a Terran Republic soldier was leaning out of the ramp attached by a harness and wielding a mini-chaingun, sweeping it back and forth watching for targets. It was Thronebeast! Hamma was glad to see this stalwart TR Officer. He was one of the veterans that Hamma really trusted as far as ground troops. He had a long distinguished history with the Terran Republic and was much decorated for campaigns he had participated in. Someone else was also in the Galaxy, as Hamma could barely make out another person just inside. That person must be the hook operator.

“Chick One, this is Lasso, prepare to fly!” the female voice called. That must be SwiftasFeather, thought Hamma! He was thrilled they had brought out the whole crew. But the thought crossed his mind that something big must be happening for them to throw in the veteran combat soldiers to do a simple rescue. Hamma noticed the Reaver sliding into view off to the right of the big transport. He figured Peacemaker must be flying that. He lifted the hook on his harness preparing for the connection to yank





him up when he saw a bright object from the corner of his eye. His head snapped right and he saw what appeared to be a TOW heading straight for the big Galaxy. At the same moment, the Reaver jumped forward right into the flight path of the lethal missile. The Reaver caught the missile on the left side of the windshield. Hamma watched as the missile penetrated the perma-glass violently, then the Reaver seemed to inhale and swell in the cockpit area, then suddenly it erupted outwards in a huge ball of fire and parts. The smoking back half of the craft dropped like a rock to the ground and secondary explosions finished off the dead aircraft. Hamma simply stood there holding the loop up. He was suddenly yanked up as Swifty attached the snap and began the extraction process. Thronebeast was busy laying down a huge rain of lead, the mini-chaingun spitting fire and devastation wherever it touched. Another set of hands joined Swifty's reaching out to grab him. Manitou was yelling into his headset microphone, frantically calling for air cover from command. As they yanked him on board, Manitou joined Thronebeast in laying down a covering fire with his Repeater. The noise of the explosion, the gunfire, and the engines of the Galaxy simply blurred into a cacophony of sound that almost overwhelmed Hamma. He vaguely saw a swarm of soldiers rushing out of the woods from the direction that the TOW had come from before he was tossed into the interior of the ship. He tried to stand, but he was exhausted from his ordeal and the world spun around him as he fell back into darkness.

Manitou was screaming at the command section to get him some more air cover when Thronebeast took a slug to the left leg. The force of the bullet threw his leg out from under him, but his harness kept him up. Fortunately it was a ricochet that had hit the ceiling of the bay and skipped down and caught him. He continued to spread death with his chaingun, spent shell casings flying all over the bay of the transport, the soldiers on the ground running toward the Galaxy falling as his cone of fire touched them and ripped into their armor and then their bodies. The Galaxy lurched as the pilot began the dust-off and Swifty was attending to Hamma who had fallen over. Manitou was also adding to Thronebeast's destructive fire firing wildly with his Repeater. The ship heaved out of range and the two men stopped firing. Another Terran Republic soldier approached the end of the ramp and aiming calmly with his bolt driver, he fired a single round before the ramp began to close. The round hit a soldier on the ground that had been pointing to the woods and seemed to be a person of authority on the ground. He dropped instantly as his head exploded in a messy spray of bone and brains and parts of helmet. DonkeySmiler smiled grimly.

"That was for Peacemaker, you rebel son of a bitch," he said in a stone-cold voice. The ramp slid shut to the sky as the Galaxy made its way back to command on the Terran Republic Sanctuary.

The man stood watching the large map glowing in faux-plas colors. The plas shifted as the different forces represented there shifted, the continents slowly growing red, or the purple chased the blue back





some to be stopped and then finding itself pressed back. The three empires had solidified nicely, the three enhancing their respective sanctuaries just as he had planned they would. The final step was to see to the activation of the multitude of warp gates that would link certain continents together affording the opposing three forces access to each other thus heating up the conflict. He laughed deeply feeling complete satisfaction that the plan of the Council was coming together very nicely indeed.

Voerlin reached for his radio, the roar of battle reaching a crescendo around him. Men were attacking and moving forward as the line of defenders ahead started to lose ground as the pressure from Voerlin's troops began to mount. The battle had begun this morning as a platoon of Terran Republic soldiers had appeared at Voerlin's building demanding that all weapons be turned over to them. The platoon was promptly attacked and wiped out by New Conglomerate troops who celebrated the victory loudly. The celebration was short as the TR had another three platoons on the way and the battle was upon them. It was a pitched battle, as the Terran Republic was very good at war, but the numbers were too great. Even though they were out-numbered almost three to one, they still forced the battle for the majority of the day as the New Conglomerate troops had to bring more and more people to the attack. But the battle did end late that night and the celebration of the New Conglomerate as a new force on Auraxis began in earnest on the New Conglomerate Sanctuary. Unfortunately Voerlin never got to see it. In the end he was killed instantly by a burst from a dying Terran Republic soldier's weapon, the Cycler unloading straight into his chest. His was a quick death, but also quick was the death of the memory of the man who began the Sanctuary for one of the three budding empires on Auraxis; lost to history forever.

The Vanu Sovereignty sniper was in the perfect perch for the job he had been assigned to do. The grandstand set up for the coming political rally for Terran Republic mayor of this province was out in the open. The entourage had proceeded from the parade ground to the stands and now stood proudly there, most of them waving to the cheering crowd. Tobias took the familiar position with the weapon cradled against his cheek. He had become very good at this and didn't need near enough the time it used to take him. But this was a huge job and he would probably not live to see the end result; he was a loyalist for the VS so that was fine. He focused on his mark, a tall Terran Republic General Officer who was at the moment saluting his troops who were marching stiff-backed and proud in front of him. The Officer was the highest-ranking Terran Republic officer in this province. The whole continent of Cyssor was actually broken up into chunks of earth thrust up from the water, having been shattered from a larger landmass by massive earthquakes long ago. Tobias' mission was to him a rather bold stroke by the VS to kill a master strategist for the TR. This general was well known for his aggressive and usually successful tactics in Terran Republic war making. Tobias could see the general's right hand at his brow, the edge of the hand towards him and the tip of the index finger lightly touching the brow. The general



was clenching his jaw, he could see, and holding the salute rigidly. The general was still saluting as the top of his head vaporized under his braided hat. His hand twitched a few times in the salute position, then went limp as the body realized it was dead. There was a stunned silence as the surrounding people realized what had just happened. Just then, Tobias saw something that he would never forget. A Vanu Sovereignty Thresher, until now concealed in a barn nearby the parade field, suddenly burst forth from the building and shot away at a high rate of speed. The reaction of the Terran Republic forces was immediate. A swarm of Mosquitoes hovering nearby raced to head off the fleeing vehicle. Tobias, not hesitating a moment, used this diversion to pack up and depart hastily using his pre-determined escape plan. The TR aircraft caught the VS vehicle easily and destroyed it completely with a massive and extremely lethal salvo of rockets and mounted chaingun fire. The Thresher was obliterated within seconds. Tobias, not even looking back, but still amazed at what had just happened, slipped away cleanly and made his way off the continent.

The official Terran Republic news release lambasted the Vanu Sovereignty movement as a "...heinous terrorist organization bent on the total annihilation of all of civilization." The Terran Republic declared a war on "...any and all who oppose the good order and discipline of the peaceful intent of all Terran Republic forces helping the planet Auraxis deal with its current world emergency." The AGN reported that Terran Republic forces were mobilizing on all continents and that forces of the Vanu Sovereignty and the New Conglomerate were also mobilizing and conducting blocking actions on all continents. Tobias turned the radio off, beginning to understand what his part had been in the biggest chess game he had ever seen.

A New Conglomerate Galaxy that was part of an extraction patrol picked up SandTrout within the hour. Stryker, the Reaver support pilot for the NC patrol, had mowed down a few Vanu Sovereignty troops and some Terran Republic forces that had tried to interfere. He had been indiscriminate in his work with the nose guns of the Reaver, cutting to ribbons all who stood in the way of the NC mission in this area. The Galaxy extracted a number of loyal New Conglomerate personnel and the two ships were able to speed away to the NC Sanctuary in the far north of Auraxis. The AGN reported that New Conglomerate troops and Vanu Sovereignty troops were engaged in battles all throughout the continent of Cyssor engaging in brutal urban combat, sometimes hand-to-hand in nature. Terran Republic forces were also involved and the battle for Cyssor had taken on epic proportions. "The carnage was incredible as the three empires struggled to maintain mastery of this critical continent. Never has human blood been shed in such an indiscriminate way since the food riots of the early twenty-second century. Today is a sad day for the human race!" declared the AGN. Reporters were responding with a multitude of battle reports on the war that was now beginning to rage all over the planet Auraxis. The conflagration that had swallowed all three empires and involved the total land surface of the planet was almost totally



complete. There were estimates that on that first day of open hostilities between the three empires, nearly a quarter of the human population of Auraxis was killed or wounded.

Manitou was holding onto a handle fastened to the wall of the Galaxy as the big ship rocked slightly with the air turbulence. He was watching as Swifty sewed up Thronebeast's leg where the jagged piece of hot lead had entered and exited cleanly through the calf of his leg. There was a lot of blood, but it was mostly dried as Swifty had gotten the wound fairly well sealed up. Thronebeast was grimacing as he watched his friend work on his leg. Marsman had come from the flight deck with a message a moment ago and was also watching the work progress on the bay floor. DonkeySmiler was sitting in a jump seat steadily cleaning his bolt driver. He was meticulous in his care for the weapon, but there were none better when it came to its use. Hamma was sitting next to him, finishing a beer. Manitou had allowed Marsman to bring a cooler along for this ride, which was unusual for the grizzled commander because he was a known teetotaler. Hamma had just finished the bottle and was reaching for another of the Samuel Adams. His nerves were frayed and he was thirsty. DonkeySmiler grinned as Hamma popped the cap and took a long pull from the second bottle, and swallowed it with a loud gulp.

"Slow down Hamma, we don't have a lot of those left!" DonkeySmiler said laughing. "You'll piss off Schrike for sure if you drink all of them yourself!"

"Yeah, sure. You get your Mosquito shot out from under you and tell me you aren't a little unsettled." Hamma replies.

"Guys, this thing is huge!" Marsman says standing. He has a radio earplug in his ear with the wire dangling down and running to a connection on a box on the bulkhead behind him. He is steadying himself as Manitou is doing while listening intently to the earplug, his right hand holding the plug in place. His eyes grow round with what he seems to be hearing. "The whole flaming planet is at war! I got reports from every command section on the planet screaming for back up and I am even getting cross feeds from VS and NC radio links saying the same things! This is crazy!" he says, shaking his head. He pulls the plug from his ear and hangs it on a switch on the bulkhead. "Auraxis is a planet in total war."

"Then the Dragon Wolves will make sure it is done right and that the Terran Republic comes out on top. Guys, let's make this personal," Manitou replies with a cold stare. The other members of the Dragon Wolves Outfit respond with grim nods and set jaws. Hamma grinned and slammed down the rest of his Samuel Adams beer in one gulp.

### The End Game



Lexington Steele guided the Vanu Sovereignty Galaxy back into the VS Sanctuary, deftly landing without a bump. The Galaxy was in rough shape structurally, as the escape from Cyssor after picking up Tobias had been a gauntlet of fire. They had to actually lower the ramp one time to allow SandTaco to blast away with his Maxx from the back of the transport when they had no less than two New Conglomerate and three Terran Republic Mosquitoes chasing them. Fortunately for them, the Mosquito pilots decided to engage each other and broke off the pursuit. The Galaxy had been damaged as far as structure, but the good thing was all the flight controls were in good shape. The lowered ramp had gotten hit a few times and was not able to be raised. It was badly mauled and the hydraulic system was shot away. SandTaco had almost fallen right out when the Galaxy had banked away from the disengaging Mosquitoes. Fortunately for him, Tobias had connected a safety harness to the ship's bay bulkhead and latched it to the back of the Maxx armor. As it was, the wildly swinging Maxx armor had smacked Tobias and knocked him unconscious. Sadfre had rushed to the fallen sniper and dragged him away from the rear of the bay. Once they landed, the VS command had sent a receiving party to download the Galaxy and get Tobias to a medic facility. Sadfre had accompanied him to the hospital. There he had joined in the massive efforts to attend the huge amount of VS casualties flowing in from all over the Planet. Lexington had been sent right back out on another retrieval mission. By the end of the day, he had been credited with twenty-three combat retrieval missions saving the lives of over one hundred VS soldiers and civilians. The last mission was the hardest and he had received multiple wounds for his efforts in extracting a patrol of VS soldiers from a bloody beach on north Cyssor. He joined the ranks of wounded in the hospital.

Although being credited with what appeared to be the opening shot of the war on the planet Auraxis, KoldFusion and Whoracle never lived long enough to receive the attention due for their work. After avoiding the explosion from the destruction of the SAM site by TR counter batteries, they had both high-tailed it to the closest New Conglomerate command center. Unfortunately they ran right into the back side of a Terran Republic attack force. They had promptly been captured and slaughtered on the spot. Their deaths were neither quick nor pretty as their screams were heard for hours.

The war of the planet Auraxis had begun in earnest. The three empires were now at each other's throats and the art of war was being developed to an extreme level as they each tried to wrestle for dominance on the planet. The assorted styles and types and strengths of the weapons developed during this war were amazing. Never in history had mankind excelled so well at the skills needed to make war. The utilization of what was at hand and only available on this planet, or left over after the collapse of the wormhole was refined to incredible degrees. The advancement of energy consumption, lethality, range and various other techniques had never been so fast in the history of warfare. The man watching the big faux-plas colored screen closely monitored all of these developments. He was rubbing his chin and





smiling at the list of details and information that was streaming in from the satellites that orbited far from prying radar on the surface. The satellites were also cloaked for good measure. The man lit a large cigar and took a long pull from it, the smoke streaming slowly from his partially opened mouth. The little cherry on the end of the cigar glowed a bright red, then subsided to a dull red as he stopped drawing on the cigar.

“I can feel the money bulging in my deep pockets even now!” the man said aloud, continuing to watch the screen.

“But you mean to tell me they suspect nothing?” the amazed woman asked from behind him. She was with two other people, a man and another woman all sharply dressed in very expensive clothing. The man was armed with a holstered pistol. “They have no idea this was engineered?”

“They are too involved in this war to do anything but struggle to survive. That struggle will continue to provide my company with accelerated weapons for a long time,” he said, not turning. “Where I will turn and offer them to the Terran Republic here, and a few isolated rebel forces who disagree with TR policies at a wildly exorbitant cost.” He turned and smiled widely to his audience. “Your work to close the wormhole and fashion the satellite system around Auraxis is most appreciated. Therefore I will allow you to die quickly.” He nodded to the man with the pistol, who promptly shot the two scientists down. He calmly holstered the weapon again. “Very good, Bruno. I am hungry. Are you? Let us retire to that little sushi restaurant on the corner. I will spring as it seems I have received a nice raise in my salary.” The two men leave the room, the cigar smoking man laughing loudly to himself.